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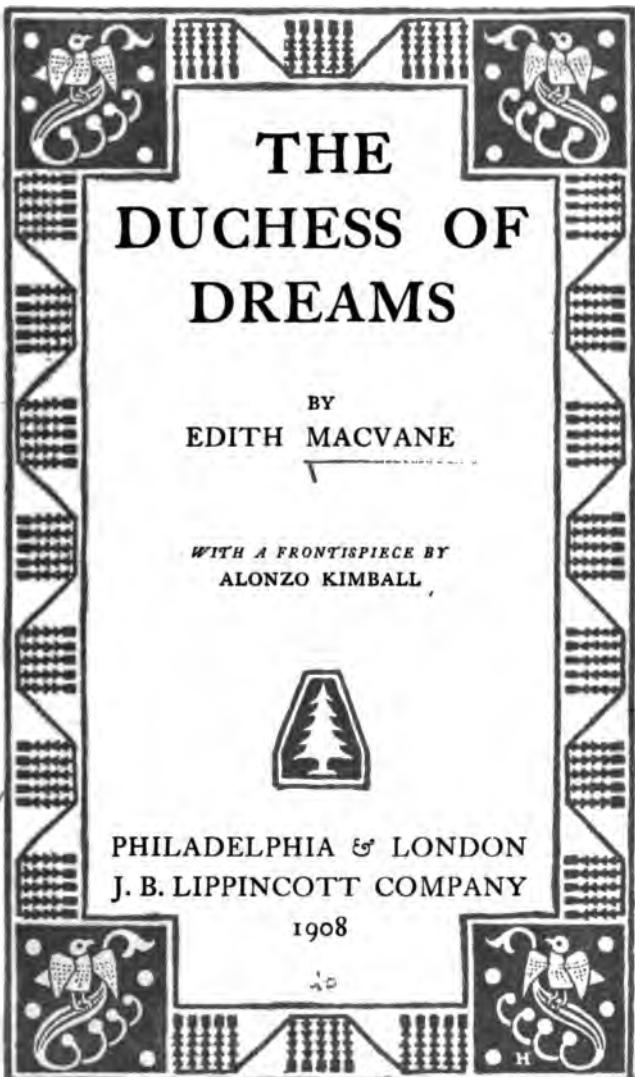


THE DUCHESS *of* DREAMS

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THE DUCHESS OF DREAMS

BY
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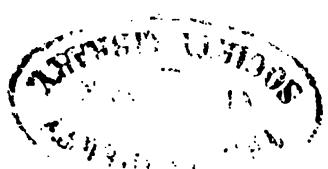
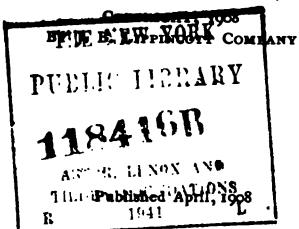


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The Duchess *of* Dreams

I.

THE Grand Duchess Varvara was coming to America. So much was at last an established fact. Of all the cities in the New World it was Newport, of all the hostesses in Newport it was that spectacular climber Mrs. J. Harrison Rumbold, that for the whole month of July was to have the honor of entertaining her Imperial Highness.

Not indeed that the intimate friend and prospective hostess of a Romanoff princess could longer be reckoned with as a mere climber—Mrs. Rumbold's position, which until now had been built (as one of her dear new friends put it) on nothing more stable than her husband's gold and her own brass, was by this dazzling stroke assured as one of the elect. Her invitations to the entertainment planned at Stormcliff, her Newport residence, in honor of her imperial guest, were eagerly accepted by

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the delectable circle of that agreeable city—even the great Mrs. Borridaile, its acknowledged leader, had signified her intention of honoring the affair with her presence. When Mrs. Rumbold received this last-named acceptance, together with that of the rising young diplomat Jack Borridaile, the great lady's nephew and heir, and the coroneted scrawl of Prince Debreczin, her noble Hungarian guest, the ambitious hostess surveyed these symbols of triumph solemnly, as Alexander may be supposed to have regarded his wreath of bays. The conquest of the world was as yet, to be sure, not actually an accomplished fact—but the Grand Duchess was at this very moment on her way from Bremen.

Mrs. Rumbold's picture, together with that of her round-faced daughter Letty and her social mentor and factotum Mr. Willy Lushington, occupied the conspicuous place of honor in the special illustrated editions of the following Sunday, between the portraits of the American-Japanese Commission, then sitting in Newport, and the last family photograph of the Czar and Czarina with their offspring. Interest in things Russian, indeed, ran high. The public libraries set out special shelves

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of Muscovite literature, the department-stores advertised a heavy run on Russian blouses and Astrakhan lace; and in the Stock Exchange Russians jumped three and one-quarter points on the day preceding the Grand Duchess's arrival.

Had the young person whose coming lay at the bottom of all these social upheavals been able to view their extent and import, she would have been genuinely delighted. Like most Russian *civilisés*, she suffered from a permanent state of boredom; any artless exhibition of human enthusiasm filled her with a pleasure that almost approached envy. It was indeed Mrs. Rumbold's obvious delight in her acquaintance and her naïve energy in pursuing it, when they found themselves the guests of the same hotel in Pau two years ago, that had first drawn the imperial lady's attention to the little American.

A period of intimacy which, though spasmodic, was not wholly one-sided, had followed their meeting. For, "Sacred blue! my angel," the Grand Duchess had cried in answer to the mild remonstrances of a relative of hers, a minor German royalty—"sacred blue!" (for the imperial Varvara, like other highly placed

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personages, often took advantage of her exalted station to use language more violent than polite) "my angel, what would you? She amuses me, this red-skin! And for us other poor Russians, born *ennuyées*, is it not sufficient recommendation for a new friend, that she chases away our boredom? Moreover, she has asked me to visit her, in the virgin forest of America. And should a kind Heaven ever terminate the sufferings of my poor Alexieff, and should I ever be able, by craft or by audacity, to escape from my post at court and my wearisome prison of Lithuania—then, *crac!* you shall see me and my sapphires on the *Cinquième Avenue!*!" And the Grand Duchess, with a snap of her sparkling blue eyes, lit a cigarette from her turquoise-studded case, and blew faint, meditative rings of pleased anticipation.

The next year a group of enterprising Moscow Nihilists had played directly into Mrs. Rumbold's hand by tossing one of their favorite missiles at the elderly grand duke, on the occasion of his Easter visit to their city. A twelvemonth later, his youthful widow had announced her intention of touring the globe —a plan which, as her married life had been

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one of strict retirement and attendance on her husband's infirmities, had evidently not been opposed at imperial headquarters. Mrs. Rumbold, reading the tiny item in the Russian column of the London *Times*, had seen her opportunity and grasped at it.

Altogether, Mrs. Rumbold had good reason to smile to herself as, curled, laced, and perfumed, she descended the flying staircase (modelled at great expense after that of the château at Blois) to afternoon tea upon the tennis-court (copied exactly after that of Francis the First); where Willy Lushington, with the details of the coming entertainment in his hands, sat and waited impatiently for her coming.

II.

MRS. RUMBOLD, settling herself among the silken pillows of her garden-chair, glanced anxiously at the face where she had expected to find nothing but smiles of congratulation and which, to her sudden uneasiness, she now beheld drawn in an unmistakable frown.

“What’s the matter, Willy?” she cried.

MR. LUSHINGTON’S troubled glance fell gloomily upon the green-coated footman who arranged the tea-tray. “Matter enough!” he replied shortly.

“Is it the Nantucket wireless from the Grand Duchess, that you think should be here by this time?” inquired Mrs. Rumbold anxiously. “But, you know, the New York office said not till to-night—”

“It’s nothing about the Grand Duchess,” retorted Mr. Lushington briefly. Opening the morocco bill-book with which, on her arrival, he had been busy, he drew from the mass of papers relative to the coming entertainment a

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small and humble envelope addressed to Mrs. Rumbold in an unfamiliar and tremulous hand.

“Here,” he said in a tone of strong displeasure, “is a letter handed me just now by a young girl waiting outside the gate, on the avenue there—a girl with pale-yellow hair, rather pretty I should say, though she was all done up in a large brown chiffon veil. She asked me, in a stage whisper, to pass this communication on to you. I told her your time was entirely taken up, but she said she would wait for an answer. Stubborn she was—stubborn as a mule! Then, when I spoke sharply with her, I’m hanged if she did n’t begin to cry. The whole thing was deuced unpleasant, Flora—a strange female threatening to weep on my neck, and hanging around the gates! It’s the deuce of a scandal, just now, when the eye of the whole world, so to speak, is on us.”

Mrs. Rumbold, skimming the contents of the letter with a furious eye, crumpled it suddenly into a ball and threw it with a vicious gesture into his hand. “Read it,” she cried in disgusted accents, “and, for heaven’s sake, tell me what to do!”

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Mr. Lushington smoothed out the wrinkled sheet of paper and applied himself to its consideration. The writer, who signed herself Angélique Hooper, expressed her regret at her failure in seeing Mrs. Rumbold; as she was sure, after the urgent invitation which that lady had given her to come to New York, that the treatment meted out to her by the servants of the Rumbold establishment had been entirely without their mistress's knowledge or consent. "Though I own to you," the letter went on, "that, after my experience at your door last February, I should not thus have returned to ask your promised aid, had I not found how impossible it is, without capital or influence, to make any headway in the profession which by your advice I have sought to enter. One moment, madame, one word is all I ask; and, after your kindness of last summer, it appears to me impossible that you can refuse me." There was a slight quivering fall in the pen-strokes of these last words, as though the writer had been suddenly overcome by weakness or emotion. The experienced Mr. Lushington, however, surveyed the trembling lines with an unbelieving eye.

"Just an ordinary grafter," he observed

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with relief. "After all, I don't see why we should be disturbed."

Mrs. Rumbold, however, took no heed of this offered comfort. "No," she cried mournfully, "not just an ordinary grafter, I own; there's the difficulty! You see, this is a girl that Jim and I happened to stumble on last summer at Bar Harbor, at one of those church entertainments that the natives in the marginal districts are always getting up; and that you have to go to for the sake of philanthropic effect. Poor Jim! I can still see him, wriggling there on the board seat beside me. But when this girl came out—well, I must own to you, even Jim sat up!"

Mr. Lushington turned the letter in his hand. "Angélique?" he inquired sharply. Mrs. Rumbold nodded.

"Angélique Hooper"—she repeated the name as though its incongruous syllables left an unpleasant taste in her mouth. "She was the daughter, they told me, of some one's French governess, who ever so long ago had run away from Bar Harbor and married a fisherman. I won't deny the place lit up when this little creature came tripping out on their absurd Sunday-school platform. Such eyes,

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Willy, and such golden hair, down to her ankles! She sang little French songs that her mother had taught her, they said—upon my word, it took me back to the *Ambassadeurs* again! For she could act as well as sing, you see! Yes, I give you my word this little half-breed savage had the true stage instinct, the real dramatic poise, the little artful ways—you know what I mean—abandon and grace, and all that! So, after the thing was done, I made her come and sit by me. And, weak fool that I was, what did I tell her but that with her talents she was wasted in the district-school, and that she had only to come to New York to make a dazzling and instantaneous success on the stage!"

"And you promised," observed Mr. Lushington acutely, "to see her through?"

Mrs. Rumbold colored faintly. "Well," she admitted, with hesitation, "I may have told her that if she would come to New York I'd be her friend, and look after her, and see that she made the theatrical success she was fitted for—you know how one talks sometimes! So I kissed her and told her *au revoir*, and the whole business naturally went out of my head. Till, in February, all of a sudden, up she turns in New York!"

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“Well,” inquired Mr. Lushington calmly, “and why should that worry you?”

“Was n’t I silly,” returned Mrs. Rumbold with a sigh of gentle self-pity, “to let it worry me? For, naturally, there was n’t a thing in the world that I could do for her. What do I know of Broadway, and theatre-managers, and all that? I might have had her for a drawing-room entertainment—but that sort of thing is so hopelessly dowdy and *passé*. Besides, I was in the midst of most important business—my new orchids for the conservatory, and my *mi-carême* ball, and all kinds of affairs. So, painful though it was to me, I just had to send down word that I could n’t see her, and tell my secretary to write her a nice letter about the temptations of the stage, and how I should always feel a sincere interest in her welfare, and all that—so she disappeared, and I forgot all about her again. And now, just in the midst of all this worry and fuss, back she comes, as bad pennies always do!”

Mr. Lushington glanced again over her letter.

“She seems to have had rather a hard time,” he observed languidly, “sick, and no work, and money giving out. That sort of thing must be deucedly unpleasant, you know!”

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“I dare say,” returned Mrs. Rumbold, with strong displeasure; “but it’s not my fault, and I am sure no woman in the city gives more money to charities and things than I. But this kind of individual fussing I cannot and will not bear. Willy, you will have to see her and settle with her. A hundred dollars—a thousand—I don’t care! But get rid of her, there’s a dear boy, before the Grand Duchess arrives. And, heavens, there’s a motor now!” as the shriek of an approaching machine was heard from the road that wound below the terrace. “Some one come to take tea,” added Mrs. Rumbold, with satisfaction. “I wonder who it can be!”

In a moment her soul nearly fainted within her for satisfaction, for in the three figures escorted by green-coated footmen over slopes of velvety lawn she recognized no others than Mrs. Borridaile, her nephew Jack, and the celebrated prince from Buda Pesth, who was honoring the American summer with his presence. For the first time, perhaps, Mrs. Rumbold recognized the supreme success of her Grand Duchess campaign; but her carefully trained eyes betrayed no surprise and no delight beyond that of the well-bred hostess. With her blonde

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head a little on one side, she gushed at her callers, with perfect taste.

“Dear Mrs. Borridaile, this is so charming of you. And you, Prince, what a pleasure! Charles, place chairs. Mr. Borridaile, I am delighted to see you. Now sit down, all of you, please, and let me give you some tea!”

With a hand that almost trembled with pleasure, the hostess dispensed her offered refreshment—tea made, in deference to the expected guest, in a large brass samovar, then served in glasses and sweetened with rum instead of cut sugar. The tumblers scorched the fingers and were apt to break, the rum was unpleasantly like a lingering molasses-barrel; but Mrs. Rumbold remembered sundry five-o’-clocks at Pau, and dispensed her unpleasant beverage, with its accompanying rye-bannocks, in an unconcealed triumph.

“But, Willy, if you *must* see that—er—young person about that—er—business, we will spare you just for one moment.” She turned toward her able assistant with a glittering smile of meaning. With a bow, he departed. Mrs. Rumbold turned back to her guests.

“So you are coming to my dance Wednesday night, are n’t you?” she said, “for my little

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friend from Russia? Now, you know, I think that is so dear of you!"

"The Grand Duchess Varvara," mused Prince Debreczin thoughtfully. "I met her husband over at Monte Carlo—the Grand Duke Alexieff—and a brute he was, with stick-out ears. But I never met the lovely Varvara herself; her elderly husband kept her rather close, I fancy. Beside that, she was ill with heart trouble, they said, fainting fits and that sort of thing."

The prince, a tall, lean-shouldered man with beautifully finished ears and feet, placed his aristocratic finger-tips together and smiled at the assemblage. His manners were charming, but the lines about his heavy-lidded eyes were many and enigmatic. At his last observation, Mrs. Borridaile smiled her dignified, middle-aged smile.

"Poor little soul!—it seems time that she began to enjoy life at last! And how long, Mrs. Rumbold, did you say that she intends to honor Newport with her presence?"

Mrs. Rumbold smiled exultantly. "A month, no less than a month, she promises faithfully."

"Ah!" Mrs. Borridaile smiled in return,

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“We must try and make the time pass pleasantly for her”—at this *we*, in the mouth of the august lady before her, Mrs. Rumbold’s frame experienced an agreeable tingle—“even if we can’t speak her language with her! But I suppose, at least, you will have the Russian ambassador here to meet her; shall you not?”

Mrs. Rumbold was effusively regretful. “That’s our one stroke of adversity,” she gushed, with a very becoming little sigh. “You know he was a great friend of my duchess’s father, and used to trot her on his knee. And as he has never seen her since, I thought it would be such a charming reunion for them; but, by bad luck, the poor count writes me that it would be quite against etiquette for him to come here to meet the members of the Japanese Commission, and as they were already invited—oh, do excuse me, Mr. Borridaile!” She brought herself up short, in sudden embarrassment. “I’m sure the presence of the American commissioners will more than atone, in itself, for the absence of the poor old ambassador!”

Jack Borridaile bowed politely, with a smile which showed his handsome teeth. He was, indeed, the American secretary of the International Commission, which was at that

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moment, with the importance of strict secrecy and much free advertising, sitting at Newport to negotiate the new American-Japanese treaty. The combination of brains, energy, and other desirable qualities which he presented caused him, it was generally said, to be looked on with special favor at Washington; and his aunt made no scruple of declaring openly that she expected some day to visit him at St. James.

The Hungarian smiled at him. "To say nothing," he said, "of the honorable secretary! Yes, I am sure that no one will miss the poor ambassador, except it be the poor little Russian, who might like to find some one to talk her dreadful native tongue with her!"

Borridaile looked up in some surprise. "But you, Prince," he said; "I thought that you knew your way around among the *ovskies* and the *witches*!"

"I? Not a word!"—the prince was quick in his denial. "We Hungarians, you must know, hate and fear Russia. As for myself, I have never set foot within her boundaries."

"But I thought," said Mrs. Rumbold in disappointment, "that you knew Alexieff."

Debreczin shrugged his angular shoulders.

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“The most formal acquaintance. At Monte Carlo we used to meet at the Prince of Monaco’s private circle. But to know a Russian, as you yourself have doubtless observed, Madame Rumbold, is not necessarily to understand his barbarous tongue!”

Mrs. Rumbold nodded eagerly. “Certainly, the dear Grand Duchess always spoke English with us at Pau, or sometimes French!”

Down the long path, between rows of new exotic hollyhocks and tall Persian pinks, came Willy Lushington. Behind him, on a small gold salver, a green-liveried footman bore an envelope of bright-yellow paper. Mrs. Rumbold, abstractedly picking up the message, smiled to hear the careless, familiar greetings between her confidential manager and her new friends. At last they were all together, and she was arrived in the class to which she rightfully belonged! This little informal tea-drinking with the uncrowned queen of Newport, this delicious unforeseen *intimité* seemed to her a warrant and a herald of Wednesday night’s success. After six years of indomitable struggle, the field was hers at last!

She smiled triumphantly into Willy’s face as he bent over her for a glass of tea. “Did you

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arrange the—*hm* and the *hm hm?*” she asked in a confidential aside.

Willy shook his head. “She refused point-blank to go off without seeing you,” he answered in the same tone. “Thanks, a small slice of lemon in mine, please! She flew into such a rage when I offered her a check, that I had to promise that you would see her—just a moment will do, before dinner-time. I know it’s unpleasant, but there’s no other way out. We can’t have the Park gate bombarded this way, you know!”

Mrs. Borridaile, catching the last words, drew a droll face of commiseration. “Ah, the reporters!” she sighed in sympathy. “I can feel for you, Mrs. Rumbold. Last month, when monseigneur arrived, they were awful, and now it’s your turn, you and your Grand Duchess! I saw a little yellow-haired person, in a raglan and a large brown veil, lurking about your lodge when we drove in. The prince was so amused!”

Debreczin laughed. “Before I had landed from the *Deutschland*,” he said, “there was a swarm of them up the gang-plank, with their red note-books, asking me my opinion of the country. So I can’t help thinking that it’s my

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turn now, you see, to amuse myself with them! So I made them stop the auto at the gate here, and I began to ask the veiled lady her impressions of Newport."

"Oh, Prince!" Mrs. Rumbold gushed with polite laughter. Jack Borridaile frowned slightly, as though at some disagreeable recollection, while the Hungarian proceeded.

"But this turning of the tables, you see, did not please her ladyship at all! She showed me her back and began to walk away. Monsieur Jack here began to call me names, and, altogether, my attempts at journalism were not a success at all," finished the prince in an aggrieved tone; then, turning to Mrs. Borridaile, "but for the future, now that I am avenged on the tribe, I promise to behave. *Voilà!*"

"You should have cheated the tribe in the first place," observed Mrs. Rumbold, "like my little Grand Duchess. She is crossing incognita, you see, as plain madame, and with a very small suite. It is really the only way, you see, to travel with any comfort. Will you pardon me if I glance at this message, please?"

With a languid hand, and a nodded apology to Mrs. Borridaile, Mrs. Rumbold opened the yellow telegram which still lay on the table be-

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side her. Around the table the merry chatter of the tea-drinkers grew and gathered. Nobody noticed that the hostess's face, as she read, turned a curious violet-gray under her *maquil-lage*, and the yellow paper rattled unsteadily in her hand.

Then she raised her eyes, with an airy and resolute smile.

“I have here,” she said slowly, “the Nantucket wireless from my dear Varvara. Her ship docks at Hoboken, at half-past seven o’clock to-morrow morning. And as soon as she is done with the customs, we breakfast together on the *Lotus*!”

III.

BEFORE the ball of Wednesday night, dinner was served at numerous little tables spread upon the glazed veranda overlooking the bay. Mrs. Rumbold, in a white lace dress, with her famous rubies, sighed with relief and triumph as she looked about, through masses of pale-blue hydrangea and twinkling lights, at the dazzling assemblage which her industry, after years of indomitable effort, and snubs patiently borne, had at last succeeded in bringing together; at the various ladies and gentlemen whose names had to her for all her life, till now, been no more than a gorgeous abstraction, like that of divinity, and who now sat here in the flesh, mangling reed-birds and absorbing champagne at her expense. She glanced at Mrs. Borridaile, dignified and gracious, and the noble prince, her guest; at the desirable Jack who, seated beside the stout and pink-faced heiress of the house, was listening to her slow chatter with an admirable air of interest. For an instant the fond mother's thought paused to swell into

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delighted hope—"What a match for Letty!"—but even from that auspicious scene, so flattering to her maternal eye, Mrs. Rumbold's glance was fain to wander toward the point where the evening's whole success, so to speak, centred and culminated. For at the table adjoining hers, smiling with her host and eating her dinner like an ordinary mortal, sat nothing less than royalty itself—a slender, black-haired figure, jewelled, blooming, and exquisite—her Imperial Highness, the Grand Duchess Varvara.

Behind her Highness's chair, splendid and extremely warm in the fierce barbarism of his native costume, stood a huge Cossack servant; and beside her, thrusting his long nose forward for tidbits from her plate, a slender, white wolf-hound claimed her attention and that of the company.

The dinner moved slowly, by starts and jumps, because the Grand Duchess insisted upon cutting up her pet's food herself, and feeding it to him with her own hands.

"You don't mind, do you?" she inquired, flashing a brilliant smile around the circle. The conversation had begun in French, which the duchess spoke to perfection, and the rest of the company with a fine American accent.

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But the weather was undeniably warm, and a strenuous evening of exertion lay before them; so, by the time the *filet à la bordelaise* had made its appearance, the whole company had by common consent changed to English (of the very English variety). This also the Grand Duchess spoke delightfully, with a little French idiom and a quaint trilling of the r's. Under the stimulus of native language and of champagne (*not* native) the conversation, which had rather languished, gathered spirit and noise. Finally, after the visitor had entertained the company with a realistic imitation of an altercation between a *moujik* (made of bread crumbs) and the driver of a *droshky* (fashioned out of a table-napkin, with a stalk of iced asparagus for a whip)—after this impromptu bit of vaudeville, the success of the evening might be said to have begun.

“Though I can’t give you a real notion of how funny they are,” added the Grand Duchess, with a fine pride in her performance, “when I have to translate their oaths and *argot* from Russian into English as I go along. So to save my face, as the Chinese say, I will modestly own I have had to tell that story twice running, heaps of times, when I dine at the Winter Palace.

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Poor Nicholas! At home, you see, we are all so bored, and he loves to laugh, occasionally! Though in English it's only your politeness, I know, that makes you laugh at all. Though I am not finding any fault with English!" she added quickly. "At Pau, as Madame Rumbold will tell you, we speak nothing else; and, in fact, it is my favorite language, and Vassily's too! Is n't it, *chéri*!"

She turned to the huge dog by her side, who wagged his plumpy tail and gazed up into her eyes with patient affection. "In fact, he gives his paw with much more chic in English than in any other tongue. Here, Vassily! Give your paw! *Donne ta patte!* Oh, stupid dog!"

"You might try him," suggested Borridaile, who sat opposite, "in his native tongue."

The Grand Duchess arched her dark eyebrows in amusement at his words. "But, sacred blue!—don't be shocked, monsieur, I only mean my sapphires, of course!"—she cried; "I ask you, regard then my Vassily's eagle nose, his wide chest, his silky skin! Are not these all the marks of breeding?—and what well-bred Russian, I ask you, will own to any knowledge of his native tongue? To be sure, I did just now; but, *pouf!* or, rather, *ouf!* which

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I believe is the exclamation put into the mouths of us Russians when you write romances about us—you other English!—we leave such barbarism to the emperor, to peasants and to reformers. Here, my treasure, is your *potage* of mushroom and gravy. Take care, Petroff, that he does not soil my dress!"

In an instant the beautiful white head, with its insistent greediness, disappeared from the Russian lady's elbow. "You spoil him, Princess!" remarked her host. Mr. Rumbold was a short, snub-nosed man who seemed slightly ill at ease in the brilliant company which his wife had collected. In his manner when he spoke, however, there was the undeniable authority of one accustomed to command, and a force which seemed to impress itself even upon the wilful butterfly at his side. At his last words she turned with a little startled smile and a deprecatory wave of her jewelled hands. Letty Rumbold, on the other side of the table, stared in open-eyed and envious delight at the dazzling apparition which confronted her, and Jack Borridaile, finding his attention momentarily unclaimed, leaned across the table in undisguised interest in the princess's chatter.

"Of course," she answered her host's com-

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mentary with smiling sweetness, "I spoil my Vassily. He is my spoiled baby—and myself, I am the spoiled child of Russia. From my infancy, I regret to own it, I have been allowed to do exactly as I please. But, indeed, why should I complain of that, when for that reason, and no other, I find myself here in this delicious land and company to-night!" She paused with a little laugh. "For, you see," she resumed, "they were n't very willing, at home, to part with me! In fact, his Majesty almost put his foot down—almost, but not quite. So, for fear he would, I rushed off with half my luggage; and that half, by my maid's stupidity, was left behind at Bremen when I boarded the *Kaiser*. Nothing came with me, in fact, but my jewels and my Vassily. Every rag that I possess, I assure you, was bought in New York yesterday morning—what a scramble, *mon Dieu!*—and what a troublesome guest I am to my poor hostess! Meanwhile, there are my trunks reposing in the palace at Petersburg, and if you looked in the *Court Circular*, or the *Novoe Vremya*, I have not the slightest doubt that you would see an announcement that her Highness, the Grand Duchess Varvara, is shut up in her castle in Lithuania, seriously ill of croup, or

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mumps, or teething. At least I forget which one I said in the note I left behind. I wonder if they have found out yet that Lithuania is Newport, North America! When they do, probably I shall have a wire to come instantly, penitently home. So if you wake up some morning and find me gone, you'll all breathe a prayer, a kind little prayer, for me, won't you? And in return I will promise that in my orisons, kind friends, all your sins shall be remembered!"

As her smile swept the table, for one instant her blue glance flashed in quick encounter with the frank gray eyes of Jack Borridaile, seated diagonally opposite to her. Ashamed of the double rudeness of which he had been guilty, in neglecting his table-partner and in staring like a child at the stranger, he hastily withdrew his gaze and returned to the rather halting conversation with Letty.

"She's pretty, isn't she, with her blue eyes and her dark hair," remarked that young person, after a frank study of her mother's guest; "though she hardly eats anything, and, oh! she talks all the time. There, she's going to smoke! Would n't you think it would spoil the taste of the mayonnaise?"

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Sure enough, the Grand Duchess, with great deliberation, was choosing a gold-tipped cigarette from the case, curiously braided of grass and monogrammed in turquoises, handed to her by the picturesque servitor behind her chair. "You don't mind?" she inquired, smiling around the table. "At home we never dream of wasting the time between courses—life is so short, at the best! Here, Monsieur Rumbold, help yourself, and let me pass them on. My special brand, you see, excellent to chase the blues and the migraine!"

In obedience to the imperial example, the salad of iced pineapple and mayonnaise waited untasted upon the table, and through the air curled innumerable white rings of fragrant smoke, rose-scented and heavy with the fumes of hasheesh and opium. As Jack Borridaile leaned back to take the light passed him by the demure, green-coated footman, he felt, or thought he felt, a light breath pass over him—a touch immaterial, fleeting, yet infinitely more poignant than any mere sentient contact. The sense, indefinable as it was, seemed for the moment strangely real and vivid; then, glancing up across the shaded candles and the delicately blooming bank of flowers, he met the Russian's

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eyes fixed upon him in a curiously sweet and penetrating gaze.

Though not over-imaginative, and not altogether inexperienced in affairs of the sort, Jack was conscious of an odd interior thrill, such as we feel in early youth and then (unless favored by special fortune) never again. For one instant, in the midst of the gay, gorgeous company, the music, the laughter, the clatter of forks and of tongues, these two pairs of eyes were fixed upon each other in that strange, secret union when soul stands open to soul. What the stranger read in his eyes, Jack did not have time or inclination to wonder; but in hers, where irids of bright blue flashed with a curious deep sparkle between lashes of shadowy black, it seemed to him that he read the unconscious appeal of a tender, generous, and troubled heart. In a quick flash of intuitive insight, he saw beneath the sky-like beauty of those strange eyes the revelation of a soul out of the common brave and loving, yet poignantly dissatisfied with life and with itself. And there flashed upon him a vague, cosmic vision of the height and the depth of the demands made upon life by such a nature as he seemed to divine; and with a thrill which was not philosophical at all, but

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all human and of the heart, he realized the splendor of the reward which it held hidden to offer in exchange.

A rustle passed around the table. Slowly the hostess rose, the chairs were pushed back. In the glittering mist of pale-blue smoke-rings and of bluer hydrangea, the mysterious eyes of the stranger were lost like stars in a passing cloud. With a sigh, Jack rose to follow the merry, chattering company to the large tent on the terrace below, where the great entertainment of the evening was to take place.

IV.

BY midnight the dance was in full swing in the glittering pleasure-house which Mr. Rumbold's millions, combined with the enterprise of Willy Lushington and the taste of a French designer, had erected in the Italian gardens on the terrace of Stormcliff.

“But it is like our ice-palaces that one builds in the winter on the frozen Neva!” the Grand Duchess had cried in admiration when she had first entered it; and the delighted company had murmured their assent. The erection before them was indeed a remarkable imitation of an ice-palace—a huge dome, maintained by a silver framework and built of frosted glass, shining with crystals, sparkling with artfully concealed electric-lights. The floor, laid flat for dancing, was made of some polished white wood that shone smooth as ice. Spreading out in every direction from the central dome were mimic cloisters, caverns, and delightful little labyrinths, whose ways wound among a delicious confusion of snowy pillars and glittering stalag-

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mites. Here and there, in this arctic wilderness, were set pale-green pools fed by splashing fountains. Even to a fancy less newly exalted than that of Jack Borridaile's, the illusion might well have been given of the snow queen's palace and its mistress, as, before a grotto of sparkling crystals and festooned green leaves, the Grand Duchess Varvara stood smiling between her hostess and her tall, silver-coated dog.

In the half-light of the veranda, crowded with dining-tables and smothered in decorations, Jack had caught only glimpses which, though vivid, had been incomplete. But now, unconscious of the jostling, chattering crowd, he stood staring at the beautiful Russian with the unconscious delight of a school-boy. Her gown, artfully woven of some gauzy silver cloth, defined the curving slenderness of her delicate shape, and fell heavily about her feet in a dragging border of bright sequins and clustering seed-pearls. On her breast glittered a galaxy of jewelled orders, and among the curling shadows of her hair there sparkled, like hoar-frost, a little coronet of diamond stars.

So far the details of her appearance were thoroughly Western and Parisian; but at the

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sight of the jewelled chains which clasped her long, thick throat, and hung down over the milky perfection of her bosom, Jack recalled, with a sudden little vague chill, the despotic, half-Eastern royalty from whom she was sprung. Both in their value and in the fashion in which they were worn, these flashing stones emphasized the alien blood of their wearer, and the immeasurable height at which she was placed above any ordinary man who should presume to fall victim to her beauty and her charm. All sapphires they were, huge, half-barbaric lakes of blue, square, oval and hexagonal, strung together in curiously wrought links of platinum. As she moved, they rippled and sparkled from her throat to the hem of her dress, like a summer wave breaking over her. In all the world there could be nothing more gloriously, more triumphantly blue; except the two large eyes whose lustrous depths outmatched even the fire-pointed ultramarine of the gorgeous baubles below them.

With a throb of self-conscious remorse, Jack pulled himself away from his ill-timed devotions to the various duties which claimed him. His petition for dances with the charming stranger had been rewarded by her bustling

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hostess with the promise of a waltz at the far end of the evening. And until that happy moment the hours of dancing, of supper, and finally of the intricate baby-games of the cotillion, wore along (to one guest at least) interminable and endless.

And yet the cotillion was universally owned to be brilliant and striking above the ordinary. Two or three of the figures indeed, it was whispered by the leader, Mr. Lushington, to his occasional partners, were of the Grand Duchess's own proposing, and were danced here at the pavilion of Stormcliff exactly as they had been by the Russian court last summer at Tsarkoe-Selo. These innovations—the Dance of the Snow-Crystals, the Circus of the Wolves, and the Tartar Charge—passed off with quite a brilliant success. At the many compliments showered upon the Grand Duchess for her delightful ideas, she laughed and showed her large white teeth in a glistening line against the soft crimson of her lip.

“Look,” said Jack’s partner to him, as they sank into their seats after their final turn in the fantastic whirl. Jack’s partner, curious to say, was by the caprice of fate (and the artful manipulations of her affectionate mother) no

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other than the inevitable Letty herself. She wore a gown of one kind of lace over a slip of another kind of lace, and at least two pounds of white Ceylon pearls suspended around her pink neck. She sat in perfect contentment, sipping a sorbet between the claims of the dance (Letty was fond of eating), and fancying herself irresistible.

“Look,” she said, “there’s somebody arriving—a nice old gentleman with lots of stars. Do have a sorbet, Mr. Borridaile! You won’t? But I must finish mine just the same. Look, there’s mamma bowing to him. Why does she look so ill, I wonder?”

The next moment Letty was sitting alone with her ice, for an energetic young matron in pink satin, looking about for some one upon whom she might bestow a large green jade monkey with ruby eyes, had pounced upon her cousin Jack and carried him off. Between the exertion of replying to her congratulations on the subject of Letty, and of attending to the slippery green animal which she affectionately insisted upon carrying with them in the waltz, he managed to put his foot through her chiffon flounces and almost to collide with Prince Debreczin and his imperial partner.

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“There,” said Mrs. Marsten frankly, “that was all my fault; but I’m glad of it, for now here’s an excuse to stop a moment by Mrs. Rumbold and have a good stare at the Grand Duchess when she comes back. She’s quite lovely, you know, she and those sapphires of hers. You watch and wait—inside of a week there won’t be a sapphire left, for love or dollars, in the city of New York, and the price of blue glass will go so high that we shall have to pay double for our bromo-seltzer. But *I* am not going to be left behind, you can be sure. I’ve been back to the villa already for a long-distance chat with my little Tiffany man in his suburban home—to tell him to hold all the sapphires in the shop till I can get down to the city to-morrow afternoon!”

“Yes, they are sapphires, are n’t they,” responded Jack, with as much indifference as he could assume, “that our Imperial Highness is wearing!”

Mrs. Marsten’s frank lips relaxed into an unmistakable grin. “Don’t be a humbug, Jack!” she said; then, with a sudden exclamation: “Look there, Jack, do you know who that is who has just arrived? The Russian ambassador—I’ve seen him in Washington.

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And, oh, is n't he wearing the loveliest plaques
and cordons that ever you saw!"

Whatever were the decorative qualities of his Excellency's decorations, Jack did not observe; for just at that moment he saw the Grand Duchess, on the Hungarian's arm, approaching their side of the glittering grotto.

"Yes, madame," the ambassador was observing to Mrs. Rumbold—who, as her daughter had remarked, looked suddenly pinched and wan beneath her battlemented tiara of glittering brilliants—"when I heard that her Imperial Highness had actually arrived, I decided to waive the purely formal objections of which I wrote you—" For one instant his near-sighted eyes glared with undiplomatic hatred through their glasses at a twinkling little Japanese, dancing past with the daughter of the house. Then, turning back to his hostess with a bow: "So I found myself unable to resist this opportunity to pay my homage to you, madame, and to her Imperial Highness. When she was a child, I knew her parents well; and the late grand duke, her husband, was my oldest friend."

Smiling, bright-eyed, with the excitement of the dance painting her carmine cheeks,

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Varvara paused before them. For an instant, as the ambassador turned to greet her, there was an awkward pause of a curious length and tensity. The Hungarian glanced from one to the other. On his arm Jack felt a slight and significant pinch from his observant partner. Then, in a voice oddly dry and toneless, the hostess spoke.

“Princess,” she said slowly, with a little laugh, “if such a formality be necessary, I have the honor to present to you your own ambassador!” And with a deep obeisance the newcomer bent low over the unsteady little hand which the Grand Duchess extended to him. For that her hostess’s emotion had extended itself to her, there could be no doubt; from her cheeks and lips the bright color had flown, and her large eyes shone blue-black against the whiteness of her face. Then, in a strong and evident effort at self-command, she spoke, with a new and appealing dignity.

“Prince,” she said, “for the honor which you pay me in coming to-night, I beg you to accept my thanks. Believe me, I bring you every expression of esteem from his Imperial Majesty!”

What compliments his Excellency murmured

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in reply Jack could not distinguish; his chief emotion at the time being, indeed, a lively desire to punch the head of the starred and ribboned individual whose presence seemed to cause his adorable princess so much pain. Her next words, however, were more reassuring, as, with one hand laid lightly on her hostess's arm, the Grand Duchess turned back to the waiting diplomat.

“I see, Prince,” she said with a little laugh, “we may as well take you into our confidence, for—confess you knew it already!—I cannot deny I am here as a truant. Promise you will not betray me to his Majesty my cousin—at any rate, not to-morrow!”

She laughed again, but her face betrayed her anxiety. With a little shrill titter of relief, Mrs. Rumbold echoed her guest's plea to the smiling ambassador, who turned with a silky gesture of his long, slender hands.

“Ah, madame,” he said deprecatingly, “I beg you, have no fear of my loyalty to you! for”—and his voice trailed off into strange, purring syllables of some unknown tongue, with sputtering sibilants and strangely vibrating gutterals.

The Grand Duchess listened attentively,

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while in sudden helplessness the hostess turned her white face from one guest to another. The little silver whistle blew, Jack's moment of liberty had expired, but he stood immovable, his jaw dropped in amazement; for before his eyes the calm dignity of the Grand Duchess collapsed like a toy-balloon beneath the inquiring pin of its youthful owner; and, burying her white face in her hands, she sank with a little cry upon the divan behind her. Her great wolf-hound, springing forward, licked her concealing fingers with a plaintive caress of his long, pink tongue.

“Madame, madame, what have I done?” inquired the ambassador in the startled accents of real dismay. What he had said in that strange tongue so to harrow and distress his solitary hearer, Jack could not divine. His indignation was, however, forced to restrain itself, and the hostess glanced in equal silence at the bent figure before them.

With a heroic effort, Jack turned to rejoin his waiting partner. Suddenly the Grand Duchess raised her face, with a wet and charming smile. “Forgive me,” she said in little broken accents, “but it is long since I have heard my native tongue—and you see those

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were the last words he said, my poor Alexieff, to the governor of Moscow that morning—and it brought it all back—the terrible scene on the steps of the Kremlin—”

“My poor darling!” burst out Mrs. Rumbold, with a sudden gush of vociferous pity. And as the bystanders rushed with fans and glasses of champagne and good advice, Jack turned with his green monkey and walked dutifully back to the impatient Letty. The poor little Grand Duchess was on the road to recovery, it seemed; and, at all events, the cotillion was drawing to a close, and the next dance—*the* dance of the evening!—belonged to him.

V.

TO the seductive strains of the “*Amoureuse*,” the glittering crowd swayed and whirled in more or less perfect rhythm. The restraints of the cotillion being over, every one had flown to his or her particular choice for a partner, and the music was nearly drowned in the noise of laughter and chattering conversation. The floor was littered with tissue paper, ends of ribbon, and stray flowers. The air, heavy with the scent of the dying roses, bore also the burden of *sauce tartare*, roasted plover, and the keen bouquet of *Veuve Cliquot*. “It’s so warm, sacred blue!” remarked Jack’s partner plaintively; “yes, it is warm to boil your tea on the ceiling! Should you think it very bizarre and very unconventional of me, monsieur, if I suggested a few moments of fresh air?”

To this proposal Jack assented, as he would have agreed to a voyage to the moon, suggested by the same lips. And accordingly, a few moments later, they walked together over the half-lit terrace, toward the rustling vines of the

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pergola. The glittering palace of crystal, with its babel of tongues and its blaring violins, seemed miles, centuries away. From the corner of his eyes, Jack glanced at the silver-white figure, with the slim and ghostly dog at its hand, which walked beside him in the starlit darkness.

“Princess,” he said, “I will warn you, at the very outset of our conversation and our acquaintance, that I am afraid of you, horribly afraid. So now it is out, and you know how much conversation you can expect of me!”

She turned her shining eyes toward him with an answering smile. Though she was by no means a small woman, still her coronet of glittering stars was barely on a level with his shoulder, and Jack stooped from his tall height to catch her soft reply.

“Why do you say that, monsieur? Do you think I have a knout up my sleeve, or is your terror, perhaps, inspired by Vassily here?” and with a caressing touch she smoothed the warm, glistening head which followed so patiently at her hand.

Jack shook his head. “No, it’s not Vassily; nor, perhaps, the knout. No, it is quite illogical, my fear of you. For, do you know, I begin to think I have seen you before, madame!”

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For an instant her white figure swayed against the dark, embowering trellis, and he heard her light breath come and go. Was it a return of her recent illness, or had he by unlucky chance said something to distress her? "Madame," he cried, springing forward with real concern and trouble in his honest voice. The Grand Duchess waved him aside with one white arm.

"Nothing, nothing!" she said quickly. "My foot caught in a tangled spray of vine, that was all. This darkness is confusing—if you will allow me, I will take your arm, monsieur. There, now I shall not trip again—no, Vassily, you must not be jealous! And now, monsieur, tell me when it was you saw me, and where."

Her voice, touched with the same clear brightness that it had shown at dinner-time, betrayed no trace of the agitation which he had fancied. Her soft fingers, resting upon his arm, were firm and light as her voice, and her teeth flashed with her eyes in a charming smile. What was the source of the sudden happiness which overflowed him in warm waves like a summer river Jack did not stop to ask himself; or to what unknown ocean of suffering, hidden

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in the dark places of his soul, this delicious stream of unwarranted joy might sweep him in the end.

“I don’t know,” he said happily, as he looked down at the little hand, white upon his arm. “Yes, that is, of course I know. I saw you first, madame, about twenty-four years ago.”

She gasped. “Twenty-four years, monsieur! But I was only a baby then! You could hardly have seen me even if you had looked at me—which does not,” she considered gravely, “seem likely, in itself!”

“And I,” responded Jack with answering gravity, “I was not quite so tiny then, perhaps; but I own it was not as a baby, madame, that I had the privilege of seeing you. No, better than that! I had a fairy-book, to which I was much attached; and the frontispiece was a beautiful colored print, a picture of the lady whom the prince discovered sleeping in the frozen palace. Boys are absurd little animals! I would rather have died, I think, than own it; but in my secret thoughts I took that lady for *my* lady. And when I blackened the eyes of my little schoolmates at recess, and had my own little eyes blackened and my little nose bloodied in return, I told myself that I was her

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champion and knight, and I fought 'all for her!' Ridiculous, was it not?"

In sudden and unaccustomed timidity, Jack glanced at the shimmering figure by his side. But he was reassured by a little soft laugh from the shadows. "Ah, monsieur, I have to come to America, which they slander as the land of dollars—I have to come to this beautiful America of yours, to find that chivalry is not dead! And this lovely lady in your picture-book—I hope you are preparing to tell me she was the exact image of me?"

At the encouragement in her laughing tone, Jack turned with sudden boldness. "Yes, Princess," he said slowly; "whether I look at you or at the absurd little picture that I have carried for so many years in the inmost disk of my brain, I see the same eyes, and the same smile, and the same coronet of stars."

"And the same frozen palace; don't forget the frozen palace, monsieur!"

He paused, then responded recklessly:

"Yes, the frozen palace, where the princess slept. But don't you see, madame, when the prince came, the princess woke up?"

He paused, frightened at his own daring. Why was it that his heart stirred, stirred like a

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shy school-boy at his first shrine, as he listened for her reply?

“But you see, monsieur,” the Grand Duchess observed, “I have been awake, all the time!” She paused; whether it was imagination or not he did not know, but it seemed to him that her light tones shook off and disowned the **thread** of some secret trouble as she went on:

“Still, I hope that should the **need** arise you would let your eyes be blackened and your nose bloodied—is that the expression?—for me, as well as for the lady in the book. Since I resemble her so much, I hope that she was beautiful!”

“Yes, Princess,” responded Jack sturdily, “she was beautiful.”

The Grand Duchess rippled with laughter—a laughter perhaps rather forced, but certainly not offended. “Vassily,” she cried, “do you hear that? Your mistress is beautiful! At least she looks like a picture, and the picture, if you look at it through the mist of years, and not too closely at that, is beautiful—so the gentleman says, and gentlemen always speak the truth, don’t they, Vassily? Come, monsieur, tell me some more—tell me all about her!”

She turned suddenly back to Jack, and a

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ray of rosy light from the crystal dome above them, falling through the vine leaves, lit up her lustrous cheeks and the sweet, keen brilliance of her eyes. With a little shock which seemed to rise, silent but overpowering, from mysterious coils and springs which nature till now had kept hidden in the secret places of his soul—in a little sharp thrill of yearning and of surrender, Jack gazed at the face before him. This woman happened to be a grand duchess of the Romanoff blood; but had she been a beggar maid, his involuntary adoration would have been no less.

“There is nothing more to tell you of her, Princess,” he said slowly, “except that the beauty of her eyes, and of the soul that looked out of them, was so great that it filled you with a strange dumb ache—that curious mingling of rapture and of pain which we feel when we listen to a lovely tune which thrills us all over with delight; and yet when it is finished, we find that our eyes are wet. It is cruel for a woman to be like that, is n’t it, Princess?”

He had said more than he had intended to say, more than he thought he was able to express. But the strong sincerity of his tone seemed to find its echo in her, as she turned with a little sudden gesture.

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“Ah!” she cried sadly, “then there, monsieur, the resemblance ceases. Because, I swear to you, there is no beauty in the poor soul that looks out of my eyes—a poor, unstable, fluttering thing that wants to be good and yet does, oh, so many things that you would despise, monsieur, if you knew!” She paused, and with a sudden effort dragged the conversation back to its original subject. “This paragon of ladies in your picture-book, monsieur,” she said lightly, “was she Russian, I wonder, and what was her name?”

The wistful frankness of her tone left him no room to suspect her of coquetry; so with equal simplicity he answered her:

“Yes, of course she was Russian; why not? And the name printed in large gilt letters below her picture was as pretty as your own—‘The Duchess of Dreams.’”

“‘The Duchess of Dreams!’” she echoed, looking at him out of startled eyes. Then with a laughing in-take of breath, and pausing with a gesture of sudden solemnity, “When we look at the sea,” she went on slowly, “moving so softly there below us, and the quiet stars overhead, what are we, any of us, Czar or millionaire, grand duke or grand duchess, but dreams—

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little, empty, feeble dreams? Yes, monsieur, you may call me that if you choose—the Duchess of Dreams!"

Her voice died away in lingering cadences of ineffable sadness as she leaned out, like a plump white bird in the darkness, over the iron balustrade toward the murmuring sea. Jack, standing silent beside her, could not see her face; but from her tone he fancied, in a quick flight of remembrance, that her face was pale as it had been just now in the presence of the ambassador, and her blue eyes dark with unshed tears. And with a quick, wrenching pang of suddenly born jealousy, which amazed him with its bitterness and its sudden revelation of his real sensations—in quick, grudging jealousy, his mind flew back to the vanished grand duke whose title but just now had been on her lips. He was dead, it was true, this man who had once possessed her; but his identity lived on, of necessity, in her; and his memory, after two years' widowhood, survived in her heart with sufficient vividness to call out the painful emotion which he himself had witnessed no more than a half-hour ago.

The dog beside her, a slender, white were-wolf in the shadows, whimpered lightly and

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rubbed his long nose in his mistress's hand. She turned back with a little start and a quick change of tone.

“My poor Vassily! Is he bored, my *cheri*? Come, monsieur, I think our dance must be at an end, and my partners wait. Come, monsieur!”

She turned with a sweep of her pale-silver drapery and a tinkle of her hanging sapphire chains. Jack sprang forward; almost in spite of himself, it seemed to him, his hand touched hers. “Wait, madame!” And her changing face, as it turned itself once more to him, was again tremulous and overcast. Then, putting out her hand in a sudden impulse which seemed to overmaster her, and in spite of herself to twist the words from her unwilling lips:

“Ah, monsieur,” she said, “if you could know what it is, when one is very far from home, and troubled, and filled with fears of this big, lonely world—if you could know what it is to see one friendly face!”

A quick step sounded on the gravelled walk behind them. “Madame,” cried a well-known voice, “pardon me that I intrude. But how could I forget my privilege of my promised dance?”

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The Hungarian, bowing low, offered his arm for the Grand Duchess's acceptance. The light from the pavilion lit up his handsome, high-featured face, and the collar of the Golden fleece which sparkled at his neck. The great white dog, yawning and stretching himself, ran up and followed his mistress.

Jack Borridaile, with a low bow which concealed the rage in his face, turned toward the marble staircase. The imperial Varvara waved her hand in an airy leavetaking.

"Good-night, monsieur," she cried—"or is it good-morning? For there is the dawn coming up over the sea." Then, turning to her newly arrived partner, "Shall we return to the pavilion, Prince?" she asked lightly. Then, as she encountered the glance of his dark, heavy-lidded eyes, she shrank suddenly, almost imperceptibly, away. His outstretched hand detained her.

"Not yet, Princess!"—his words, though smilingly uttered, had the sudden, keen force of a command—"for first, you see, we are going to have a few words together, you and I!"

VI.

EBREczin's first words were, however, of no obviously terrifying tenor. "I am indeed glad, Princess," he observed courteously, "to see that you are so soon recovered from your recent faintness. I remember, that spring at Monte Carlo, how your poor husband disquieted himself over those heart attacks of yours—often and often has he described to me how you would sink down with your lips so blue, *mon Dieu!* as your own sapphires. To-night, however, I recognized none of these alarming symptoms—I congratulate you, madame!"

The Grand Duchess stood silent, fingering the petals of a rose on the wall by which she stood. Then, as though with an effort,

"Mrs. Rumbold had not understood from you yesterday, monsieur," she said slowly, "that you were on such friendly terms with—with my poor husband as your present words would imply."

"Nor had I understood—forgive me, mad-

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ame," rejoined the prince quickly—"that your Imperial Highness was on such friendly terms with his Imperial Highness, your lamented husband, as your recent emotional attack at the recalling of his memory would imply!"

Varvara drew herself up in indignant amazement. "I think, monsieur," she said coldly, "that you forget yourself!"

He fixed her smilingly with his eye. "No, Princess," he said slowly, "I forget nothing—neither myself, nor the Grand Duke Alexieff, nor your charming self, madame! My memory, if I may boast it so, is usually reckoned infallible; a voice heard in passing, a face whirled by in an automobile—these airy trifles remain forever indelibly fixed upon my brain. But pardon me," he interrupted his own words with a laugh, "that I thus discourse on my own peculiarities. Do I bore you, madame?"

Varvara stood silent. He repeated his question. She turned toward him eyes which shone cold and luminous in the half-lit darkness.

"Yes," she said, "you bore me. Shall we dance, monsieur? It will be the last dance of the night."

The prince laughed softly, as though her sharp words had been subtle flattery. "But

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you allowed Monsieur Borridaile the privilege of ten minutes on the terrace, Princess," he insisted. "Is he then so much more favored than I?"

"Since frankness is the fashion—yes!" she answered deliberately.

Again the prince laughed. "Bravo, madame! For the young man's sake I am glad to hear it. My poor friend Jack, I have watched him this evening; he is not one who readily falls in love. But this evening—ah!" with a delicate gesture he kissed his finger-tips—"I congratulate you, madame; you have won a life-long slave—a faithful and valuable slave."

The Grand Duchess's fingers scattered the rose petals in pale showers around her. Indignation, horror of the soft-voiced man beside her, caught at her breath and stiffened the muscles of her flying fingers. But down beneath anger and wounded dignity the insolent words of Debreczin had struck from her heart a strange pang of a new and secret delight. With a curious hesitation in her manner, she turned back to her tormentor.

"And now, monsieur," she said in a low voice, "have you insulted me long enough, or shall we return to the ball-room?"

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“Madame!” the prince’s air was filled with a grieved astonishment. “Insult you? I assure you such was not my intention—blame it rather upon this insipid French language that we talk together—so”—his supple tongue melted in soft feline cadences as he leaned toward the white-clad, shrinking figure.

He ceased. The Grand Duchess was silent. He spoke again. She turned with a little fluttering laugh.

“And why,” she asked quickly, “am I expected to understand Magyar?”

For a moment their eyes encountered and clashed in the twilight. Then, “Princess,” rejoined Debreczin slowly, “the language that I spoke was Russian!”

She flung up her head with the triumph of one who finds her answer ready: “But, monsieur, only yesterday you assured Madame Borridaile you understood no word of Russian!”

“Certainly,” he replied with smiling candor, “that is what I said, and what I would say again. It is, you see, imperatively demanded by my position that I disown all acquaintance and connection with things Russian. The country, the language, are not only unknown but hostile to me. The Russian service?—it does not exist.

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The Grand Duke Alexieff?—I once called *red* or *black* with him at Monte Carlo. For the rest I am a prince of the Dual Empire, immensely respected, drawing an enormous revenue from my vast wheat-lands in Eastern Hungary. Ah, *mon Dieu!*” his tones broke off in the accents of a profound self-pity, “if I had never met the Grand Duke Alexieff, madame!”

“I think,” retorted the Russian coldly, “that I may echo that wish, monsieur!”

“Shall we sit down?” Near by them stood a carved stone bench (fetched by Mrs. Rumbold at fabulous expense from a decayed Italian villa). Unwilling, as though compelled to surrender by an inward force stronger than inclination, the Grand Duchess sank down upon the indicated seat. With a deprecating gesture, the prince seated himself at her side.

“You are right, Princess,” he retorted in answer to her last words, “for your own sake, perhaps; for mine, beyond all doubt or question. We played together, Alexieff and I—first roulette, and then baccarat. I played—the weakness is in my blood—like a madman. He played like a consummate artist. His reputation, as you know, spread over Europe. The result of our week’s play together, however”—he took

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in a long breath—"was *not* spread through Europe. No, it leaked not even over Monte Carlo!"

The Grand Duchess moved restlessly upon her seat. What was to be the outcome of these monstrous, unsought confidences? "You lost, monsieur?" she asked indifferently.

He laughed shortly. "I lost? You the wife of Alexieff and yet you don't *know* the fate of all that played with him? He had brains, I own it. Gambler, soldier, statesman—ah, if he had been Czar! I might then have kept my estates, perhaps—but as the case stood, I played with him and lost—everything! A whole province of Hungary, madame, my funded property in the Bank of France, the jewels that were to be my wife's when I should marry—such payment was obviously impossible. So to redeem my possessions, I sold myself to him—myself, body and soul."

The Grand Duchess turned. A sudden fear was in her eyes. "What do you mean?" she asked quickly.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Again, Princess—you the wife of Alexieff and yet do not know that he, alone of all the grand dukes, was deep in the secret statesmanship and crooked

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policy of Russia? Ordinary tools for his service—professional spies, adventuresses, noblemen publicly ruined and degraded—there were ready enough to his hand. But a prince of royal descent, whose name and possessions might seem to warrant him as incorruptible—such an instrument was worth his own price. So, at the price of my own estates and revenues, Alexieff bought me. At his death, my incriminating notes-of-hand were passed on to Pobydonestieff. At *his* death—though, *mon Dieu!* large as the amount may be, it sometimes seems to me that I have earned it already!"

"So you act," said the Grand Duchess bluntly, "as spy for our government?"

He made a gesture of putting aside the ugly word with his hand. "As Russian agent, madame! I confess the work is not without its exhilarations. Last year at Algeciras, for instance, the balking of the German policy—all my work, Princess! And now, I am sent here to Newport—"

He paused for a moment. The princess's eyes, touched with contempt and a curious fear, were on him. "To look after me?" she asked with a delicately edged insolence.

He bowed. "Undoubtedly that will be one

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of my most pleasing avocations—but my serious purpose, madame!” He leaned forward, to whisper in her shrinking ear. “This secret treaty that the Americans are making with Japan—we have reliable information it defines the terms on which inviolability will be guaranteed to the Chinese frontier. The new alliance is aimed directly at Russia. It becomes absolutely necessary for the prosperity, for the very life, of our interests in the Far East, that we know the terms of this new contract. Do you follow me, madame?”

She nodded with the bewildered air of one who wades suddenly in waters unexpectedly deep. “You honor me with your confidence in so vital a matter, monsieur; and as a good Russian, I wish you success.”

“A thousand thanks, Princess!” his teeth flashed at her in a smile. “But I want, you see, more than your good wishes—I want your help!”

This time she turned, confronting him. “What do you mean?” she asked tensely.

“Listen!” again he spoke cautiously in her ear. “Your new friend, Monsieur Borridaile, is, as you know, the secretary of the American Commission. When I accepted the invitation

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of madame, his aunt, to make my home with them in Newport, I had, I own, certain scepticisms concerning the wisdom of the course. And now I own that I am baffled—balked by the too-open door which lies before me. A guest's hands are, as you know, tied by the very privileges which he enjoys; by the obvious simplicity of the various means which lie ready to him. My utmost caution and astuteness show me no means to obtain the documents I need without drawing on myself a plain suspicion which means my ruin; for one breath of suspicion attached to the name of Debreczin, and, *pouf!* I become a broken tool, useless for Russia's purpose, ruined. On the other hand, if I fail in my mission I am ruined.” He took in a sharp breath that whistled between his lips. “You see my dilemma, Princess?” he asked slowly.

“It is a painful one,” she replied briefly.

“Painful,” he retorted, “but—this evening only have I perceived it—not insoluble. Madame, just now I told you I need your help. Here is the case, stated baldly: John Borridale has a secret; John Borridale is, or would be, your lover. I want you to win that secret from him!”

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Varvara sprang to her feet. In the faint gray of approaching daylight, her beautiful face showed as colorless as the light itself. Her hands were clenched, her eyes blazed.

“What vile bargain do you propose to me, monsieur?” she asked in a tense whisper—“I, to play for this young man’s heart, to win his honest affection, and then betray him? Do you think that anything you could offer me, monsieur, could buy me to corruption such as this?”

With deliberation the prince drew his cigarette-case from his pocket. “You will have one, Princess? Ah, I forgot, you smoke only the imperial make. But you will give me permission? A thousand thanks!” With the adroitness of one long used to play upon human souls, he allowed the cool-dropping instants of silence to fall on the flaming spirit of the woman before him. Then:

“In exchange I offer you, Princess, my silence. The cable message which I had intended to send this morning to my imperial master—I will not send it.”

She surveyed him indomitably. “To the Czar—to call me home?”

“Since you put it that way—yes,” he smiled

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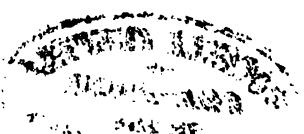
at her with the admiration of an adversary who can afford to be gallant. "The truant shall not be betrayed. She shall have her month of freedom and pleasure and—and love. But—she must pay for it."

"But suppose," she replied with an effort, "I do not care to buy! Suppose I withdraw from the game, I leave Newport to-morrow!"

"In that case," replied the prince with dangerous suavity, "you lose your promised month, and your friend, Madame Rumbold—*eh bien*, she loses something more!"

The Grand Duchess started. This was a new aspect of the case. "Madame Rumbold," she said softly. "Very well, monsieur, if you make it her affair as well as mine"—her large eyes brightened with a sudden idea—"then, if it is only money that is needed—"

The prince drew himself up with a sudden indignant haughtiness which, all things considered, brought a fleeting smile to the white lips of Varvara. "I, madame! Do you think that one of my blood is to be bought and sold with the gold of an American millionaire, like one of their own politicians? Even if the money, in buying back my notes-of-hand to Alexieff, could buy back my reputation which my em-



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ployers hold between their hands. No—exposure, nothing less, is the weapon which they hold always over me in case of failure.” For a moment a bitter constriction passed over his dark, high-featured face. “Listen, madame!” he added suddenly.

She stood piteously. Listening was in every glance of her tortured eyes, of her slender, shrinking form. From the Hungarian’s voice and features as he confronted her, the courtly suavity dropped suddenly away as a poniard is plucked from its velvet sheath.

“Listen, madame,” he said, “the terms of the treaty I must know—my choice lies between that knowledge and ruin. You can win me that knowledge; so before you lies the same choice as mine. *Mon Dieu!*”—he broke off suddenly in the plaintive tones of self-pity—“if you think I enjoy the situation in which I am placed! If you think I find pleasure in the terms which I am obliged to make with you! But when ruin stares one in the face—ruin, do you understand? That is not a pretty word, either to you or to me. Come! I ask you no troublesome questions, you observe—I merely inquire: Do you accept my terms? I offer you silence in America, and my influence—which

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in this case would be all-powerful—to procure for you from the Russian press and government the silence in Europe without which, you will own, your holiday cannot very long continue. In return, I ask for your aid. Come, the party is breaking up, they will remark our absence. Come!" he cried again, as she continued to hesitate, "is it to be yes or no?"

Her eyes fell from his. Limply she sank down upon the cold, carved stone of the bench. Through her tormented mind ran swift gray reflections of the past years of her life—years of stagnant monotony, of deadening restrictions, of a loneliness too forlorn to be endured even in retrospect. Was it to that dungeon that she must now return? That the radiant and mysterious influence which to-night for the first time had come into her life could by no possibility be prolonged beyond the present, no one knew better than herself. The barriers of rank, of deep-running worldly prejudices and age-old caste ideas, must make forever impossible for her the realization of such happiness as to-night had touched her with the edge of its wing.

But the month—the promised month of free, delightful life, illuminated now by the

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exquisite allurements of this new, undreamed-of joy? The dull level of lonely sadness to which then her life must return—would it be made any more intolerable by the consciousness of the guilt which was hers? while to the end of her life she would bear a heart enriched by the treasures of the remembered days. And yet—to betray him!

“I can’t do it!” she gasped with dry lips, “you have no right to propose such a bargain to me. A traitress! For whom and for what, monsieur, do you take me?”

Through the blue rings of his cigarette smoke his dark eyes surveyed her steadily. For the first time there passed between them a glance of perfect understanding.

“You know, madame,” he said softly, “for whom and for what I take you!”

There was a moment’s pause. The princess’s face was quite white. She laughed recklessly.

“You are right, monsieur,” she said. “Who am I, to cavil at the terms you offer me? I agree, monsieur—here is my hand, I will do my best!”

Over her hand his eyes glinted with sudden, tigerish ferocity. “Your best?” he sneered

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openly. "This is no question of your best. You must *do* it, do you understand? My employer accepts no excuse from me—I accept none from you. The terms of the Japanese treaty, or—you know what, madame!"

She gathered her forces for a final word. "Here comes Mrs. Rumbold—tell me!—out of your experience can you give me a word of advice—how do I begin; how do I go to work?"

His answering smile cut with delicate, two-edged meaning. "Princess, you are a beautiful woman—that is the beginning. Princess, you are a beautiful woman—that is the way you go to work!"

She shrank away from him to meet the smile of her hostess, descending the marble steps with Willy Lushington beside her.

"You naughty *chérie*, do you not know that every one is beginning to say good-night? Prince, you are a wretch to rob the Ice-Palace of its Queen. Are you not ashamed?"

The prince bowed low in profession of his penitence; he bowed low enough, indeed, to hide the triumph that flamed from his heavy-lidded eyes.

VII.

IN the large arm-chair by the open window, with her dark hair rolling like an inky stream over the white folds of her night-dress, sat the Grand Duchess Varvara. Her white dog was coiled at her feet, and her maid nodded sleepily over her, bathing her forehead with water of violets.

For the past hour the turrets of Stormcliff had been touched with the pallor of dawn, and sunk in the silence of sleep. But from the girl by the window, sleep had never seemed so far away. What was it he had said to her, this new friend with the brave outside and the clear, honest eyes? "For when the prince came, you see, the princess woke up!"

Yes, that was true. From the sloth of egotism and vanity and unscrupulous self-seeking, she had waked up at last; only—there was the unspeakable horror of it—to sink, with eyes wide open, into depths of which she had never dreamed. Should she, after all, accept the conditions offered her by this

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Hungarian? Yes—no—the consequences of either answer cut through her thoughts like a whip. And through the confusion of these hurrying visions, like the new sun burning through the misty sea-rim below her, pierced and kindled the light of Jack Borridaile's kind gray eyes.

There came a tap at the door, echoing with sinister oddness through the silence of the room. The maid opened the door, and in flew no less a person than the mistress of the mansion herself, her slim shoulders covered with a long, trailing *negligée* of flowered silk, her bare feet thrust in a pair of pink embroidered slippers.

“My dear Madame Rumbold! So you are sleepless too! Pardon me if I rejoice at your misfortune, since it brings me so much happiness. Rose, place a chair.”

Mrs. Rumbold smiled sweetly, as she settled herself and her ruffles in the large pale-blue damask chair which the maid wheeled up to her. For a moment the two ladies eyed each other, covertly but intently, while the maid shook the gold-topped perfumed bottle (monogrammed, like all the other portable property in the room, with a large V and a crown) and

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with the wet handkerchief dabbed the white forehead beneath her hand.

“Poor little princess!” gushed Mrs. Rumbold, with profuse sympathy. Then, with a sudden inspiration, “Perhaps her Highness will allow me, Rose,” she said, “to bathe her head for a while. I have a gift for curing headache, a positive gift! For, as my poor James always says when he has one of his nervous attacks: In the touch of affection there is healing! You will allow me, Princess?”

With a smile, the Grand Duchess watched her hostess, as with bland insistence the latter took gold-topped bottle and handkerchief together from the hand of the sleepy maid, and bent her blonde head and flowery *negligée* together over the chair of the fair sufferer.

“Will her Highness desire anything more?” inquired the maid, with a deferential yawn.

“No, Rose, you may go. I will take care of your mistress for a little while. There, dear Princess; that is better, is it not?”

The door closed behind the retreating servant. With little, cat-like steps, Mrs. Rumbold gathered her pink flounces about her and, flying to the door, made sure that it was fastened. Then with a second thought she opened it

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very cautiously, to make certain that no listener stood concealed behind its panels. The other doors and the windows having been treated in the same way, she came back with leisurely steps to the blue damask arm-chair, and flung herself into it with a yawn. The perfumed handkerchief lay upon the rug, the gold-topped bottle distributed its essence to the hungry air, and the ministering hands of Mrs. Rumbold, clenched into lazy fists, were extended above her head in a long and comfortable stretch.

“Thank heaven!” she remarked piously, “for just one moment’s rest! Upon my word, after the strain I’ve been through to-night, I wonder my face is n’t cracked to bits. But we’ve done it—yes, we’ve done it!” Her whisper had the fervor of a shout; and as her slim fists came down from the air, she sprang to her feet with a sudden triumphant pirouette.

The girl in the chair, holding her aching head between her hands, surveyed her with wide-open, fixed eyes, filled with dumb suffering like those of a dog.

“Ah!” cried Mrs. Rumbold again, “it has been a gorgeous success. To you, my dear Miss Hooper, I don’t mind owning that to-night has made me—thanks to Mr. Rumbold

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and Mr. Lushington! Willy managed things rather cleverly yesterday in New York, did n't he? The clothes and the jewels and Petroff—oh, Petroff, he *was* a stroke!—and the wolf-hound too—to say nothing about the stars and orders from the pawn-shops, and all the books with the details about Russia! Yes, it was a busy day, and it has brought me good returns! Though, I must own, I have had the same feeling all the time that I had the day Jim and I climbed Vesuvius. We 'd come pretty high, and everybody could see we were on the top—but who could tell what moment it would all crack and blow up under our feet? Well, it did n't. So, as the worst is passed and vanquished, I think I may say our month is safe."

The girl surveyed her shrinkingly. "Yes," she said softly, "that was what I understood—one month!"

Mrs. Rumbold nodded in reply. "After proclaiming it over the country, I can hardly make it less than the allotted time. And after all, why not? I don't mind saying, after the success you've made to-night, that I'm not afraid to risk my social advancement on your performance. You have done splendidly, Miss

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Hooper, and Mr. Rumbold and I shall have the greatest satisfaction in handing you your check. I told you, you know, and now you see I was right, that you have a genius for the stage—a born actress, my dear, a born actress! And when you let the black out of your hair, and drop your French accent, there's really no reason why you should n't go on the stage in earnest. For the way you caught the royal air, you know, a little country girl like you—it was a wonder!—and the way you worked in your Russian allusions, out of your Tolstoi and Baedeker—it could n't have been better! Yes, I see now, and more clearly, it was a special Providence that brought you to my door yesterday!"

The girl's smile was tinged with a faint bitterness. "Though perhaps," she answered slowly, "you did n't suspect it at the time."

Mrs. Rumbold shook her head with solemnity. "Which only shows, my dear, how inscrutable are the ways of Providence. Well, but I'm free to own I was in despair! With that wretched cable from the Grand Duchess telling me of her sudden illness—bad enough if it had arrived on time, but delayed a whole week by the censor in Petersburg—goodness gracious! what would have become of me if

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you had n't turned up? I should have been the laughing-stock of Newport—ruined, disgraced forever! It was a risky business, I own, but you 've pulled it through, and saved me. Yes, and when that wretched ambassador popped in to-night, after declaring he could n't come”—she stopped to gasp—“when all of a sudden in he walked with his threats to report to Petersburg and his horrid, chattering Russian—I don't mind owning, Miss Hooper, that you saved the situation again. You might have knocked me over with a straw; I was helpless, just helpless! But the way you wriggled out of the whole fix, and made him look foolish instead of us—it was genius, positive genius! So, I say, as *that* point is met and weathered, the rest of the month will be plain sailing. Because, after all, when you come to think of it, that dreadful ambassador was the only person in this continent who could possibly have given us away. As for the danger of the news getting back to Russia, and being contradicted there—who in Russia, I ask you, ever dreams of looking at an American newspaper? Especially the evening shockers, which are the only ones to print details about the Grand Duchess, you know! As for the Russian

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representatives of the Associated Press—well, I 'll tell Mr. Rumbold to attend to *them*.” She rose to her feet. “Good-night, my dear child.”

The girl put out her hand. “One moment, Mrs. Rumbold. I think it only honest to tell you—” She paused and wet her lips. Mrs. Rumbold surveyed her with suddenly quickened interest.

“What is it?” she said sharply.

“That man with the fat eyelids and the gold collar,” answered the other wearily; “that Hungarian prince—he knows.”

Mrs. Rumbold’s little pink face went suddenly the color of ashes. She grasped the back of the chintz arm-chair for support. “But he told me,” she said thinly, “that he knew nothing of Russia—that he had barely met Alexieff—that he had never laid eyes on the Grand Duchess Varvara!”

The girl smiled dully. “He had his own reasons for denying all knowledge of Russia,” she answered, “and, as things have turned out, he has tricked you to some advantage to himself.”

“What?” cried Mrs. Rumbold—“what? You mean that he—”

“I mean,” answered the girl concisely,

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"that he offers to make terms, to—what do you call it?—compound the felony. He offers to keep silent if—if I—" Her tongue halted and stumbled. For the first time, it seemed to her, the full, iniquitous depths of the proposed transaction lay fully revealed to her. An hour since, in her assumed character, it had been the treachery to a friend which had alone presented itself to her—now she began to realize that the treachery to her country was no less. She sat silent, sunk in the depths of self-abhorrence. Yes, even to buy one month—one whole month—of the ineffable, living joy which to-night had revealed to her, the price was too much to pay!

She was recalled to herself by Mrs. Rumbold's long-drawn laugh of relief. "Oh, so *that's* how the land lies? Thank heaven we get off so easily!"

The girl glanced up quickly. Upon the unspoken meanings which laughed openly from Mrs. Rumbold's cynical green eyes, she felt herself shrivelling in a sudden wave of scarlet shame. Not till that moment had she suspected there were depths lower and more disgraceful than those to which she had already fallen. "No, no, madame," she said hoarsely; "I

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beg you to believe—it's not *that* he has asked of me!"

Her hostess's gaze was one of frank bewilderment. "Then what in the world"—she cried.

"It's—it's business," said the girl in painful accents; "certain information that he wants. He asked that I turn spy, traitress, for him."

At the word *business*, Mrs. Rumbold's delicate face sharpened itself as on sudden flint. "Not—not any of Mr. Rumbold's schemes?" she asked harshly. "Not the Pacific Steamship Combine or the B. & W. deal?"

The girl shook her head. "No—something quite outside the house, I assure you! But it's not worth mentioning, after all. I have made up my mind it's not worth while buying immunity at such a price, and, with your permission, I'll disappear to-morrow."

Her tones trailed off in the accents of a profound despair. Then she turned with a little sharp exclamation of pain. Mrs. Rumbold's bony little hand had descended like a vise upon her bare shoulder.

"You're going to leave me in the lurch?" she breathed shrilly. "You're going to leave me at this man's mercy, to be ruined and made ridiculous in the eyes of the whole country?

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It's not that I'd be afraid of the Grand Duchess herself—she's a good-natured soul enough, and she'd appreciate the situation her cable left me in. But the newspapers—the American newspapers! You've got to stand by to save me from them, do you hear? It's you that have the price to buy his silence—whatever he asked of you, it's not as dishonorable as your betrayal of me would be. Promise you'll do your best—promise you'll stick by me—promise!"

Her fingers sank deep in the girl's soft flesh; but neither so deep nor so painfully as her words sank in her listener's mind. Her duty to Mrs. Rumbold!—this was a point which she must not forget.

Remembering the bitter determination of the Hungarian's threat, she could not doubt that her failure to meet his demands, whether by open refusal or by quiet disappearance, would be met by the same resentful use of the weapon he held in his hands. Not only she herself but Mrs. Rumbold, the Rumbold name and position and soaring ambitions, lay in the power of a desperate and unscrupulous man. Of the two evil rôles now presented to her by the comedy upon which she had so blithely entered, which was it her duty to choose? So

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far as consequences went, adroit handling of the business might save Borridaile from any calamitous results, even from any knowledge, of the betrayal of diplomatic secrecy. That solution of the trouble, difficult and risky though it surely was, was yet not impossible. Already, and without her will, her fertile brain was spinning expedients. Moreover her heart, still throbbing with the quick, cruel, exquisite elixir which the night's chance had distilled into it, cast its weight heavily in this side of the scale.

What right had she, after all, to become the instrument of disgrace and ruin to the woman who had trusted her?

With a sudden resolution she lifted her blue eyes to the steely gaze that flamed down into hers.

"You are right, madame," she said with a little shake in her voice. "I'll do my best, I promise you."

"Ah!" Mrs. Rumbold relaxed in sudden relief. "Then *that*'s settled. I don't ask you what the prince wants you to find out, because it's probably something dangerous, and there's no use in my burning my fingers—I prefer to stay on the safe side of the fence whenever it's

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possible. But if you want any help at any time, dear child, just come to me. The best of luck to you—and now, my dear, good-night!"

The crisp pink draperies rustled from the room, the door was closed. The great white dog, crouched carefully on an outlying fold of his mistress's white night-dress, rubbed his cold nose in a timid caress upon her arm. The homely touch, coming to her as it were through a dark maze of falsehood and doubt and strange, new bewilderments, touched her to a sudden child-like helplessness.

Slipping to her knees, the girl pressed her cheek to his warm silken fur. "Dear dog," she said, "I 'm a cheat. But you know, don't you, that I only did it for fun? I never meant to be really bad—but now, there 's no choice left to me!"

The dog, regarding her with affection, wagged a patient tail, and licked away the slow tears that ran trickling down her cheeks.

VIII.

DURING the fortnight that followed, it became increasingly evident to Newport and to the world that if ever social capital had been profitably invested, it was the time, money, and energy that Mrs. J. Harrison Rumbold had invested in her dazzling importation of an imperial grand duchess. From the day after the ball there had been no doubt about that; either in the minds of the unprivileged many who read in the New York dailies (which put their political and foreign news on some inside page in order to do justice to the really interesting subject of the day) the spread headlines describing the Fairy-like and Costly Entertainment Given to Newport's Most Exclusive Set, by Mrs. J. Harrison Rumbold, in Honor of her Guest the Grand Duchess Varvara—or, for the matter of that, could there remain any lingering doubts on the subject of Mrs. Rumbold's social fitness in the minds of those who next day sent their cards and monogrammed

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letters to swell the haystack piled on the gold tray carried to Mrs. Rumbold's bedside.

"Mrs. Vanhuysen requests the pleasure—"; "Mrs. Borridaile requests the pleasure—"; "Mrs. Seton-Jones requests the pleasure—"; everybody in Newport that *was* anybody, in fact, requested the pleasure of Mrs. Rumbold's company and that of her imperial guest, the Grand Duchess Varvara!

The newly rich set, who before had formed Mrs. Rumbold's coterie of intimates, now gazed on her with far-off, dazzled eyes. As for the leaders, who had snubbed her, they were now only too glad to acknowledge her bow as she drove down Bellevue Avenue of an afternoon. Her place, indeed, within the fairy ring drawn about the innermost circle of society, could no longer be disputed by the most prejudiced. There was no entertainment, however intimate, informal, and dazzling, at which she was not a welcome guest; no leader of fashion, however important and middle-aged, whose character she was not privileged to tear to bits, and with whom she had not talked over the delicious inner secrets of banting and face-massage. Yes, she was at last established beyond doubt or cavil, as *the* Mrs. Rumbold, with all the rights and

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privileges which the title conferred. And after Willy Lushington, the Newport world confessed in a gasping admiration for the cleverness by which it had been overcome, it was the Grand Duchess that had done it.

In spite of continual rumbling threats, that lady's August Relative had not yet desolated the New World by cabling for her immediate return. However, as her time at the best was to be limited, she openly declared her purpose of escaping from her national boredom by enjoying the New World delights to the fullest; and even the indefatigable Mrs. Rumbold herself was sometimes pale under her *maquillage*, before the coming of the morning found the little Grand Duchess ready to shut up her toy-box and go home.

Altogether, it was the most brilliant season that Newport had seen for many a year. Not only European royalty, but international diplomacy, in the persons of the American and Japanese commissioners, was present to add distinction to the usual humdrum of American society. Mrs. Rumbold had announced the forthcoming visit of a distinguished American senator. And to crown all with a delicious thrill which gave almost the illusion of royalty,

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there were murmurs of hovering Anarchists. Mrs. Rumbold imported a couple of plain-clothes men to ride on bicycles behind her and the Grand Duchess in their automobile. The czar himself could touch no higher pinnacle of importance.

Outside the immediate earshot of the ladies of Stormcliff, yet another topic was offered to wag tongues and set ears to pricking. The desperate devotion paid by Jack Borridaile to the imperial Varvara—what would be its outcome? The difference in rank between them, with the thousand obstacles which it represented, was so obvious and final that a diplomatist, of all men in the world, was the least likely to attempt bridging it. Furthermore, it was an open secret that the enterprising mother of Letty Rumbold had already marked down Jack as her prey. Was it not possible, this permitted devotion to her beautiful guest was only part of Mrs. Rumbold's deep-laid schemes? To win him to the house, through interest in a quarter manifestly impossible; then, perhaps, when the beautiful stranger received her orders to leave Newport, and her admirer was left to fancy himself disconsolate—then, perhaps, propinquity, a little artful managing, a few

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smiles and tender overtures of sympathy from Letty—well, one could never tell. In these affairs tact was everything, and in bringing Newport to her knees she had already accomplished a more stupendous task than in winning over young Jack Borridaile.

But Jack himself, had this adroit schemer known it, was by no means of a calibre or of a mood to be dangled thus easily, and then caught on the rebound by a waiting hand. Having hardly ever, in all his thirty years, so much as fancied himself in love, his suddenly conceived passion for the charming Varvara had nearly the fire and purity of a first attachment; while at his period of life his feelings were deep and not easily shaken.

Just what procedure the situation demanded from him, was a question to which he had given many anxious days and restless, despairing nights. Though troubled with no false modesty, he well understood the gulf that lay between a plain American citizen and an imperial daughter of all the Russias. The situation, viewed in the strong light of practical common sense, seemed sufficiently hopeless. And then, always at her side, dangled the unpleasant Debreczin, whom so many people considered a Hungarian

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blending of Bayard and of Brummel. That he was over-head-and-ears in love with Varvara was evident; and if she happened to return his fancy, what objections could be raised, even by the august head of her family, to the suit of a long-descended noble, knight of the Golden Fleece, and own cousin to the Hapsburgs? The idea was monstrous, disgusting—but always, unhappily, perfectly possible.

After all, what midsummer madness was his thought of winning such a prize! Even the Grand Duchess herself, it seemed, must realize his folly..

For, “Oh, Mr. Borridaile!” she said to him one evening, as together they stood on the *porte cochère* of the house where everybody had dined, and whence everybody was now proceeding by motor to finish the night at Mrs. Marsten’s little villa on the Point—“oh, Mr. Borridaile, it’s all very well, you know, your pretty story of the Duchess of Dreams and the gallant knight! But suppose the princess was a hard, tough, thick-skinned sort of a creature, that refused to wake up, even when he poked pins into her and screamed in her ear! Or suppose, even, that when she did wake up, she found that she was held down with a thousand invis-

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ble chains, so that, no matter how hard she tried, she could not move; and she had to lie there and bite her lip to keep the tears back, as she watched the prince ride away again. Tell me," she added, with a curious hint of pain in her voice, "what would have happened then?"

"I don't know," Jack answered sturdily; "for in my story, you see, it never could happen that the prince rode away!"

IX.

FTER Mrs. Rumbold's celebrated Frost Queen entertainment, the next most successful occasion of the year bade fair to be Kitty Marsten's Jungle Mysteries, as she had dubbed them on her cards of invitation. In spite of her strenuous efforts to keep the precise meaning of the term shrouded in mystery, the features of the evening were an open secret to the hundred-odd who were invited (as well as to the hundred-thousand-odd who were not so favored).

A troupe of Hindu performers, who had arrived in New York a few days ahead of their vaudeville contract, were to give their first American performance for Mrs. Marsten and her friends. There were to be whirling dervishes, it appeared; also persons who would delight the company by sticking themselves all over with knives, and a fakir who would swallow his tongue and be buried alive in a real grave, filled in with real earth by the gentlemen of the party. The chief attraction of the evening,

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however, was the unveiling of past, present, and future by Lal Deesa, an escaped inmate of the Missionary Home for Child Widows, now being featured as the chief drawing-card of the company. Her genius for reading fortunes, by means of the mirror and the ink-pool, was said to be something amazing. The slight novelty of her method was all that was needed to give a fillip to the undying delight of the human soul in hearing itself and its private affairs the subject of discussion. Those of Mrs. Marsten's friends who had pasts, and the even greater number who hoped for futures, came eagerly in answer to her invitation.

Under the wide rafters of the enormous central hall, the company were already seated when Mrs. Rumbold and her party, very late, made their entrance. The little woman's head, nodding as though beneath the weight of its huge tiara, saluted her acquaintances here and there with a regal dignity that made some of them smile. In reality, her heart was bursting with pride within her as she beheld all these aristocratic faces, once rigidly unbending in her presence, now turned with one accord toward her entrance and that of the graceful figure that followed her. The whole business had been so

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beautifully managed—the dangerous secret had been so perfectly, so easily kept! Mr. Rumbold's influence in his own country, Prince Debreczin's in Russia, had so entirely succeeded in closing up the two dangerous orifices whence any unpleasant information might become public! As for the Hungarian himself, she had no fear there. The compelling beauty of the girl who held the key to the situation, his evident and complete submission to her—pshaw, if she could not buy his silence in one way, she would be able to do so in another! And if this last resource failed, there was always Mr. Rumbold's check-book to fall back upon. Anyway, so long as the desired end was secured, it was none of Mrs. Rumbold's business how it was attained. And with the most agreeable sensations of success, she glanced from her right hand, where by a little skilful manœuvring Jack Borridaile had been placed beside the stout Letty, to the other side where the prince was whispering gaily into the ear of the Grand Duchess.

The latter, dressed in white as usual, and with her tinkling sapphire chains, appeared unusually variable in her moods. All through dinner, pleading weariness, she had sat and

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smoked her cigarettes in silence; and, indeed, her pallor and the dark circles about her beautiful eyes gave sufficient warrant of her exhaustion. Just now, however, in a sudden reaction of spirits, she had returned to her usual volatile gaiety.

“Just look at those Nautch girls—don’t you adore them?” she cried, with a wave of her cigarette toward the flashing figures on the little improvised stage. “They always remind me of tiger cats, so yellow and sleek and lithe—at least, that’s what my poor, dear husband used to say. I remember, he had a particular passion for their dancing. The first year after we were married, when Nicholas sent him to Nijni Novgorod to open the Great Fair, I remember the poor man dragged me about to so many Oriental booths and entertainments that ever since I have been quite ennuyée at the mere sight or smell of the East! I know it’s not in character—you Anglo-Saxons and Latins, you adore the saying that we other Slavs, we belong not to the East but to the West. There’s one of your great writers who says, ‘The Russian is a very delightful person, till he tucks his shirt in.’ But, sacred blue! I own that I am very much tucked in, all around!

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It 's not only the little yellow enemies of my country"—she cast a careful glance about the circle ("No offence to any friends of yours, Monsieur Borridaile!)—but it 's not only the people of that detested island, it 's the Orient, the Levant—I know nothing of them and I refuse to know anything! Though I remember"—she touched her round chin with a meditative finger—"that the official censor, who was a great friend of my poor husband's, once brought me a revolutionary sheet that he had confiscated, all about me and a ball that I had given. It was all there in print about what a beast I was, and that the bad qualities not only of Muscovite but of Oriental were mine: extravagant like a Pasha, deceitful like a tombstone, and cowardly like a little mouse behind a trunk. And my poor Alexieff said, what no doubt you dear people would say if I gave you time to speak, that had this Nihilist gentleman known me better, he would never have put in that clause about my Oriental manners, for the one distinguishing good quality of beast and of Oriental alike is lacking to me—I own it, oh, I own it! Never, never can I hold my tongue!"

Again she stooped to the dog that nestled affectionately by her knee. To the sharp eyes

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of Jack Borridaile, it seemed that in the twitching line of her white lips he read the effort which this rambling nonsense cost her. In Mrs. Rumbold's uneasy smile, and the veiled glance of the Hungarian, something of the same consciousness appeared. Mrs. Marsten, however, met her guest's discourse with an answering laugh.

"But if you expound your own character, Princess, what's to be left for my little fortuneteller to reveal to you?" she demanded gaily. "Come, I insist upon your patronizing her; you came so late, almost all the others have had their turn. I can tell you, she makes your skin creep! Prince Debreczin can tell you; he was in there just before you came. I don't like to advertise my own attraction, but just the same I can't help asking you—did n't she make your blood run cold, Prince?"

The Hungarian drooped his heavy-lidded eyes in a nod of assent. "Wonderfully cold, madame! And since the Grand Duchess's arrival, she will vouch for it that I have been spending my time in urging her to enter the chamber of mysteries, and give over her life to the gaze of your little lady with the glass bangles and the impenetrable yellow veils."

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The Grand Duchess made a little uneasy gesture. "I don't want to!" she said in a low tone, like a child.

A stout and smiling person, attired principally in diamonds, who had edged her way into the conversation, corroborated the prince's words in a little gush. "Wonderful things, Princess! I assure you. She told me all about how happy my husband and I were on our honeymoon, and about the trouble I have with my housekeeper, and my dear little spaniel dying last month. To be sure, it's a bit hard to get the ink off, afterward," and she showed a fat and jewelled hand, whose pinkness was in the centre of the palm stained to a faint purple.

The girl nodded gravely. "I know," she said; "it's one of their most usual tricks, these Eastern occults, and I grant you they do wonderful things with it. At that very fair at Nijni, I remember, we had one of these people brought to us—first to my husband, then to me. They pour ink into your palm, yes; then they throw into it the light from a mirror and look and look and look. After a while they see things—this man foretold to my poor Alexieff, and then to me, all that has happened since—" She shuddered faintly. "So you see, if I don't

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feel like going in to this Madame Lal Deesa to-night—”

“And all the more reason,” cried Debreczin, with brisk cheerfulness, “that, to supplant those painful recollections, you should be given some pleasant prophecies to-night! You understand, madame, I’m a bit of a seer myself. I feel sure, absolutely sure, that only joy remains to be unfolded to you for the future. And for the rest of it—like the fox who lost his tail in the fable—since I have been drawn into giving my support to popular superstition, I have no wish that my friends reserve the right to think themselves superior to me! Come, Princess; if you go, our friend Monsieur Jack will be the next—won’t you, Jack?”

Jack nodded. Though he disliked being made a party to the whim thus ruthlessly urged on the poor little pale princess, still he saw no way to evade the Hungarian’s insistence. “As you wish, Debreczin!” he replied lazily, and Mrs. Marsten turned in delight.

“There! My little Hindu should thank me for securing her two such distinguished clients,” she said. “Come, her séance will soon be done and we’ll all be dancing. Come, Princess!”

The Grand Duchess rose. Upon either

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white cheek a scarlet spot flamed up suddenly, and her hands were clenched upon her fan. Jack Borridaile, watching her dear face with the same intense concern as always, asked himself in perplexity why the prospect of this childish charlatanism should cause his idol such evident and hardly controlled apprehension. Mrs. Rumbold, also, held out a restraining hand.

“My dearest Varvara—don’t you think, perhaps, the effort is unwise—”

“*Patatras!*” cried the girl, in sudden gay determination. “If you think I’m to be daunted by a little Nautch woman who fancies she can see through *my* past and future, then you’re all much mistaken! It’s a bargain. Prince Debreczin, you shall not outdo me; Monsieur Jack, do not forget that you follow me!”

With a flash of white teeth and rippling brilliants together, she rose to her feet. The wolf-hound, stretching himself, leaped to follow her. Mrs. Marsten put out a detaining hand.

“No, Princess, I’m afraid that Vassily must stay—”

The Grand Duchess broke in on her words with a peal of oddly nervous laughter—“Certainly, he’s an unclean beast, is n’t he? Are n’t

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you, my poor Vassily? So stay behind with your dear friend, Madame Rumbold, while your wicked little mistress goes and has her sins laid bare to her own terrified gaze. *Au revoir, my friends!*"

Under guidance of the bustling Mrs. Marsten, the slender white figure threaded its way across the thronged hallway, past the staring, admiring company, past the group of brown-skinned performers who stood by the door. The embroidered curtain fell behind the figures of the two young women; and Jack Borridaile, replying mechanically to the labored remarks of Letty, ruminated on the puzzling features which his adored princess's attitude, this past half-hour, had presented for him.

Why, in the name of all that was sensible and serious, should she show such unaffected dread of the little commonplace humbug whom Mrs. Marsten's money had this evening hired to amuse her guests? Was it a mere nervous horror of the process whereby, as she had hinted, her husband's tragic death had been foretold? Or did the reason lie deeper still?—was it the future, not the past, that she dreaded to see unveiled? The robust Mrs. Seton-Jones, indeed, had passed through the ordeal with

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nothing more dreadful to show for it than a revelation of domestic irritations and her spaniel's death. But behind the Russian's eyes, wells of loveliness and mystery, lay other secrets than these to be disclosed.

And as his inner eyes, filled always with her image, conjured up before him the scene now passing in that near-by room—the delicate hand which he loved filled with a murky pool and extended to the peering eyes of the Hindu charlatan; as he pictured to himself the two women now together, his brain stirred in an odd thrill, if not of curiosity at least of wonder. This fortune-telling business was of course all humbug of the rankest sort—“pure fake,” as he phrased it to himself. And yet she herself had owned that a few years since, at the Great Fair of Nijni, the truth had actually been revealed to her by one of these wandering Hindus. That truth had been, in all conscience, horrible enough. But now what revelation was it that, to the very blanching of her tremulous lips, she so dreaded to hear to-night?

“Is n’t it exciting!” Letty’s monotonously well-trained voice was saying in his ear; though as a matter of fact her placid face looked anything but excited. “I am simply dying to hear

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what the Grand Duchess will say when she comes out, are n't you? She was trembling all over just now at the idea—did n't you notice? These Russians—there's probably *something* that she does n't want to hear! What do you suppose it can be?"

The brevity of Jack's answer warned Letty off this subject. With considerable pride in her own tactfulness, she went on to prattle of the lean brown dervish now whirling on the stage.

"Exactly like a big brown spider, is n't he?" she said. "And if he has to do that as a religious duty, and spin around and wail that way for two hours before he dares eat his dinner, I don't see how he can have any appetite for it when it comes, do you?"

The flow of her words was blent and lost in the monotonous clang of the gong, the shouted *ahi!* and the endless buzz of Western chatter all around them. Mrs. Marsten's Jungle Mysteries were indeed worthy of their name. The feathery green bamboo and dwarf deodars which strewed the hallway, nodding in their tubs and strung with glowing orange globes, gave (as Mrs. Rumbold gushingly observed) a very jungly impression indeed.

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The air was heavy with the fumes of hasheesh, and burning mandragora, and the dried dakh-flower. On the stage the lean-limbed black figure spun and spun in a great shadowy circle like a buzz-saw. In endless rhythm, gong succeeded to cry and cry to gong. In spite of the frankly farcical quality of the whole entertainment, there was in the air a strangely hypnotic quality.

How long she was gone, the poor little Grand Duchess! As he remembered the painful unwillingness, the great and obvious dread, with which she had gone to this mysterious Oriental seeress, Jack blamed himself that he had not interfered to save her from the ordeal. But now it was too late for regrets. Would she never come back? Was it possible even now she was suffering, even now she was in need of him? Was it possible that even now, in that shut-off room behind the deodars and the embroidered curtain, she was face to face with the mysterious revelation that she dreaded? He set his teeth angrily; Kitty ought to understand this dabbling in occultism was extremely out of place in an evening merry-making—most of all when its victim was a highly strung nervous subject like Varvara!

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Suddenly he was roused from his meditations by a touch of the hostess herself upon his arm.

“You’re to go in there now, Jack, if you don’t mind,” she whispered. “As for the Grand Duchess, she’s a little upset at some of the things she heard, and so she won’t come back for a minute or two. The only thing she wants is Vassily. Come, Vassily, your little mistress is a bit out of sorts and wants you with her, do you understand?”

“Well, of all the infernal nonsense”—began Jack savagely. His cousin, however, stopped him short. “What’s the use of making a fuss?” she asked practically. “I can’t do less than provide entertainment for my guests. If they choose to take it seriously and go into hysterics, it’s not my fault, is it? And, after all, what’s a little hysterics, for a girl? She’ll be down again in a few moments—until she is, Jack, you know that you might as well go in there and bore yourself with Madame What’s-her-name, as stay outside and bore yourself here with your other friends!”

Jack, with a shrug of his shoulders, acquiesced helplessly. With a brief explanation, Mrs. Marsten turned to the others of the little

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group—the duchess had been rather upset by the visions of the ink-pool, and must take an instant's repose.

Why did Mrs. Rumbold's face, beneath her sparkling barricade of diamonds, turn suddenly pinched and wan as before the Russian ambassador's eyes, on that first night of the ball? Why did Debreczin's hard face, bowing with expressions of polite concern, twitch into lines of secret and hardly dissembled triumph? Above all, what had the Grand Duchess heard from the Hindu woman?

Diplomat though he was, the waters in which Jack waded were too deep for him. Shrugging his shoulders, he turned to follow his cousin as she left the room to take the wished-for dog to her imperial patient.

A moment later the embroidered curtains behind the deodars were drawn back by one of the white-turbaned negroes, and Jack, half-sceptical and half-mystified, entered the little half-lit room.

X.

ON a pile of cushions covered with a huge moth-eaten tiger-skin, crouched the Nautch woman. From glittering dark eyes to bare brown feet, her supple form was swathed in folds upon folds of gold-colored muslin; over which, mingling with the silver fringes of her veil, fell the jewel-trimmed braids of her heavy black hair. The dull-green globe that hung above her struck fiery glints from the watchful eyes that brooded beneath her dark forehead, and from the endless glass bangles with which, from shoulder to wrist, her delicate brown arms were covered. So still she sat, however, that not even the frail crystal circlets gave forth a tinkle that might tell of life; only those furtively sparkling eyes, watching him between the yellow *yashmak* of the Mahomedan and the fringed veil of the Hindu. It was evident no stage property offered by the Orient was omitted—not even the silence, of which, a few moments ago, the Grand Duchess had spoken with so envious an admiration.

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In spite of his natural contempt for all such performances, Jack's soul was moved to a kind of unwilling awe by the reflection that here before him was the veritable person whose revelations, a few moments ago, had so mysteriously moved the woman whom he loved. What those revelations might have been, not even his imagination dared inquire. But for the first time, perhaps, in an odd, sub-conscious shock, he realized the absolutely hopeless nature of the barriers which cut him off from his heart's desire. The thoughts, the life, the past and future of the Grand Duchess Varvara—they must remain forever a sealed book to him. The unknown griefs, the mysterious perplexities whose burden even now bowed her down—he was powerless to give her relief or aid. Why, of her real self, of her actual, inner life, the wandering dark-skinned show-woman before him knew more than he! And glancing back in a sudden start of remembrance to the keen glance which watched him, it seemed to him that those eyes which had penetrated the unhappy soul of Varvara, were reading his own thoughts of her as well.

From behind the heavy curtains of the doorway, the gong sounded unendingly in its dim,

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reiterated clang. The green light, the embroidered hangings, the heavy perfumes and the watchful eyes—all these things were not without their effect. In the frank tribute which a successful man pays to another successful practitioner, even in the humblest rank of human endeavor, Jack owned that the woman and her managers knew their business. Not erringly had she estimated the effect of long-drawn silence and her own brooding, diamond eyes.

Suddenly she broke the stillness. “What is the Heaven-born’s wish of his servant?” she asked politely. Her voice was the voice of the Orient—high-pitched and dry, with the toneless click of dumb piano keys or of rustling insect. For answer, Jack extended his muscular right hand to her.

“The other hand, sahib!” Then, bending over it—“I see lines here that might tell me much,” she said slowly; “but, *Ja illah!*—the reading of the lines, that is a child’s game. The sahib is willing that I pour the ink?”

“What else have I come for?” responded Jack impatiently. How nonsensical of Kitty and the rest of them to force him through this ridiculous business! And yet, on the point

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which at present interested him more than all the rest of life put together, he must own that this woman was probably better informed than he. For a moment the possibility of tampering with her, of obtaining from her probably unscrupulous lips some information on the subject which was the centre point of the world for him—for a moment this thought reared itself before him like a visible temptation. The next moment, however, the unworthy obsession had left him; and he was watching, with considerable interest, the ingenious clamps by which his hand was secured in the teak-wood hand-rest; and the flagon of hammered silver from which the glistening black stream fell brimming into his palm. Then, by a deft arrangement of candle and polished reflector, a shaft of light was thrown into the inky pool. Behind that white and luminous bar, the Nautch woman's veil-wrapped figure melted to hardly more than a green-lit shadow, from which her eyes, like two sparkling blots, peered down into his palm.

“Wait,” she said softly, “wait—” In the silence that followed, he heard her light breathing come and go. Without, the clanging of the gong had been supplanted by the droning song

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of a conch. Yes, aecidedly the woman knew her business.

“*Ai!* There be strange things that I see!” she said beneath her breath. Then glancing up at him with a new respect in her bright eyes, “All this night,” she said, “I have wasted the good art that my mother’s mother taught me, peering among the shadows of shadows—cow-fed fatlings, and fools made heavy with much gold. One there was among the women, indeed, that I could not despise. But now—now I see in the ink-pool the shadow of a *man*.” She paused, then went on slowly: “And I see—I see—*Ja illah!* the shadows come and go. Slant the wrist so, sahib—yes, I see more clearly. A good life—a good life. All runs straight and clean. But here, deep within—deep, deep within—I have the Heaven-born’s permission to continue?”

“Yes,” answered Jack quietly; though, to own the truth, his heart was beating rather more quickly than usual.

“Not grief,” the thin, sweet sing-song went on, “not grief, but the danger of grief. There is a light that glows like a rose—it takes form and substance. But here—here is a belt of darkness that lies across the pool. Ah, I see—

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look, sahib, do you not see?—a barrier that cannot be overleaped, a blight that lies upon hope from its beginning. I have the Heaven-born's permission to interpret? Beware, sahib, how you give your heart!"

For a moment she paused. Her words, vague though they might be, came with an aptness of meaning that set her listener's steady nerves to vibrating strangely. The passion which for these past weeks had been taking gradual possession of his soul, the longing so dear, so foolish, so hopeless—never in the silence of his heart had he perhaps realized the depth of that feeling, and its fatal fruitlessness, as now when he heard it voiced in the cicada-like accents of this little hired humbug. A humbug? Yes, but she was wiser than he. *Beware, sahib, how you give your heart!*

With a clink of the ringing glass bangles, the yellow-wrapped form straightened itself again. "I have spoken. Does the Presence desire that I question the Fates again?"

Jack nodded. Since once, with such painful accuracy, the woman had hit the nail on the head, it was at least worth an extra five minutes to allow her to practice her curious art again. Especially as, in returning to the outer hall,

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there was small chance that he would yet find the face which in his present state of mind was the only one that he desired to see. But no—the little Nautch woman was right. This was a point to which, with all the energies of his soul, he should forbid his thoughts from returning!

Again the beam of light lost itself in the glistening blot that filled the broad, brown palm. “See, sahib! The shadows come trooping. For you life holds much, so much, beside the fever and the vanity of love! For you, forgetfulness will be easy. For beside the things that I read here in the well of the palm, where is the woman who is worthy one sleepless night? *Ja illah!* I myself am a woman, and I know—worthless toys all, sahib, worthless toys of a moment! But ambition, and power, and the control of the destinies of nations! The Heaven-born’s feet are on the neck of his servant. For I perceive, in the deep places of his soul, knowledge and secret power which emperors seek in vain. Slant the palm again, sahib—let me look again!”

At this sudden touch upon matters for him professional, Borridaile’s wonder suddenly rose again! Unless she had been primed beforehand

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by Kitty Marsten, the woman's insight was certainly remarkable. Still Kitty's knowledge, like that of all the outside world, was strictly limited. Should the woman show an inkling of diplomatic secrets which were jealously guarded from all but a few—then, indeed, he would have to lay down his scepticism and fly for refuge to the old saw, "There are more things in heaven and earth—"

Suddenly, with a lithe motion which, like a laugh of delight made corporeal, ran rippling over her whole sinuous figure, the woman glanced up at him. "The sahib is my friend," she cried, "and the friend of my people! And to think that this dull flesh of mine never warmed to give me warning of his approach!"

The unexpectedness, the unaffected sincerity of her voice, quite removed these last words from the province of charlatanism to which her former utterances might belong. Jack met her bright fierce gaze with a sudden genuine interest.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

For answer she touched the yellow folds of her veil. "If I might lift this childishness—but no, it is a sworn contract with the patron who takes us through America. The mystery,

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he finds, will aid my business! But if I might lift my veil and show my poor face to the sahib, perhaps he would understand. The sahib has been in India?" she finished suddenly.

"As a globe trotter—yes."

"Ah! And the sahib knows Afghanistan?"

Jack shook his head. "Nothing north of Lahore."

She drew in her breath. "*Ahi*, it is a pity! But even in the cities, the sahib has doubtless seen my people. If I could show him my face, he would know me for no sleek rice-eater of the plains. We are black, we hill-people, yes—but we know how to love and how to hate. And the foe of my foe is my lord and I am his servant." With a gesture of Oriental obeisance, she spread her jewelled hands and bowed low over the ink-filled palm.

Jack stared. "Excuse me, I don't follow. What foe is it you are talking about?"

Her eyes flashed at him. "The foe of every Afghan! You do not know, sahib? Russia!"

"Ah!" Jack reflected an instant. "But I thought it was generally understood at Calcutta your country-people were inclined to look north with a very undesirable feeling of friendliness—"

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She interrupted him vehemently—"Lies, sahib, all lies! Because a few rifle-thieves and sons of infamy take gold from over the border, does that alter the fact that of our own free will we choose England as the lesser evil? No! Take the English guns from Khyber Pass, and we know well the hand that is waiting to fall upon us. Listen! My father died of the knout laid upon him by a band of Cossacks one night that he wandered over the border, above Peshawur, in search of a lost cow. My mother and little brothers starved to death. And here am I, a wanderer, without home or caste or name, plying my art for bread in a strange land."

The thin, chirping tones rose to a passionate shrillness. . It was curious, her listener told himself—the séance seemed to be turning to an exposition of the Hindu woman's life, rather than his own! But, even so, it was vastly more interesting; and as she stooped again over the glistening pool in his palm, he drew her back again to the subject she was quitting.

"And so you hate Russia?"

Under the yellow opacity of her veil, he heard her teeth come together in a savage click. "*Mai, ai*, do I hate her! From the Czar down

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to the least and meanest in his empire—down to the little fool-woman who only a moment ago came in here and laughed at my art; then fainted, and went off into tears, when she found that I knew more than she thought. *Ahi*, do I hate Russia ?” She laughed a little gurgle of contentment as she stared into his palm. “We are well met, we two,” she said: “I, who wish that all Russia had but one single heart that my dagger might pierce it”—and she fingered lovingly a little jewelled hilt at her girdle—“and you, sahib, who at this very moment are putting shackles upon her wickedness. Look into the pool—look! Is it possible you cannot see what is so plain to my eyes ?”

Her breath came and went in the intensity of her excitement. Jack considered her bent form with a new respect. That her eyes could pierce not only his private and personal feelings, but also approach the secrets of state of which he was the repository—this he had never imagined. How much, after all, did her ink-pool nonsense reveal to her ?

“Let me look—let me look!” her voice went on fiercely. “Yes, here you stand and I see the tears of Russia—ah, that is good! I see other men with you—older men. You take

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from Russia cities and harbors. Here is a fortress, looking down over the port where ships lie at anchor. So little they are—so faint and far away! Yes, I see the eagles of Russia. I see your hands, and the ships that sail away. Wait—wait—the shadows take form again!—yes, you press Russia to the north, you bind her and hem her in, you push her ever, ever to the north and to the west. The nations of Europe look on and smile, and the yellow peoples of Asia rob and despoil her who once had robbed and despoiled. Low, low is she brought, through these very hands. Can the Heaven-born deny that I have spoken to him the truth?"

In sheer amazement, Jack was silent. In thin, hurrying tones, the Nautch woman repeated her question—"Answer me, sahib; own that I have told you the truth! And if you own that I have told the truth, then you shall hear more, more—no, sahib, no!"

Suddenly, as though the interview had not been of sufficiently bizarre a character, the woman leaped to her feet. "No, sahib," she breathed again hurriedly, "I will not have you answer me. What I have told you has been for love of my art, for the memsahib's gold, what you will—not, you understand, for idle curiosity.

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The truth of my own words I know, without waiting for answer of yours. Come, sahib, wash your hand in this silver basin—and now, I have others who wait for me. Will the Heaven-born have the graciousness to withdraw?"

The whole thing, Jack told himself, had been excellently managed, down to the very last stroke of the dramatic dismissal. Beyond a doubt, Kitty had hired no fool to amuse her guests! In some doubt as to the procedure in the case, he drew a ten-dollar bill from his pocket and offered it to the woman. The eagerness with which the brown hand closed upon the money served, however, to remove any doubts that he had concerning the propriety of the gift. With a clink of her glass bangles, she salaamed her farewell. Jack shrugged his shoulders and withdrew. After all, the advice that she had given him had been well worth the money. Was it her fault, if things had gone beyond the possibility of his taking it?

At the door of the hall he was waylaid by Prince Debreczin, who, seized upon by a wandering and very talkative Japanese, was extremely willing to share the burden of his entertainment with his host. The Japanese, who was no other than the junior member of

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the Commission, clung to the friendly secretary, like a limpet to a wharf, for a full half-hour. Furthermore there were several mammas, with lovely and smiling daughters, whose greetings must be returned and whose allurements evaded. Finally, however, Jack succeeded in gaining the corner where, between Mrs. Rumbold and a cloud of respectful adorers, the Grand Duchess Varvara sat expounding her contempt for fortune-telling in general and for this one in particular. She still looked very white and wan; and the quivering ostrich plumes which, by way of fan, her hand swung slowly to and fro, gave token of her recent indisposition. Her liveliness, however, was as indefatigable as ever.

“A little white goose, nothing less,” she was saying as Jack came up, “though if you ask me which one of us, the little Hindu that pretended to read the unseen, or me myself for letting her weary me into a *crise de nerfs* with her stupidities—upon my word, I don’t know! And here’s Monsieur Jack! How are you, monsieur, and what did you hear? How many times are you to be born, married, and dead; or is it a secret? For myself, it is no secret! As for being born again, that’s hopeless—but

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rejoice with me, my friends, prepare your funeral baked meats and your marriage garments, for *I'm* to be married again!"

There was a little murmur of applause as she flashed her brilliant, dark-ringed eyes about the group. In spite of himself, Jack felt an odd pulling at his heart, which her next careless words changed to an inexplicably bitter pain. "In fact, *I'm* to be married *twice* more—figure to yourselves, dear friends, would n't it be better to go into a nunnery at once?—or into a monastery!"

In spite of her determination to make light of it, it was plain that either her indisposition, or the revelations of the seeress which were its cause, were of a more serious character than she was willing to own. A few moments later she rose to her feet with a request to Mrs. Rumbold to take her home. "I know *I'm* a fool, Flora," she said languidly, "but my head *is* bad."

So the energetic Flora, with a few words to Jack on the entertainment which he had planned for the morning, and a brisk smile to the hundred dear and very select friends whom she would desolate by her absence, swept her party together and withdrew from the room.

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Even without the words of the little Hindu charlatan, Jack would have been warned by the sudden darkness to which the room was reduced by the withdrawal of the sapphires and the bluer eyes of their wearer, of what a very bad way he was in. As it was, his only inward resource, as he returned to talk shop with the little Japanese commissioner, was to count the hours till the longed-for rendezvous of next day; and to puzzle, puzzle without ceasing—what could the Nautch woman have said to the Grand Duchess Varvara?

XI.

PRECISELY at noon of the following day, Jack Borridaile's four-in-hand coach, the Fire-fly, drew up before the carriage door of Stormcliff. The young man himself, freed of his diplomatic duties by a postponed sitting of the Commission, had arranged a party to drive to his little bungalow on the banks of the river, eat a picnic lunch, then home again in time for tea at Stormcliff.

Mrs. Rumbold, descending to take her place, was in a state of beatific satisfaction not easy to parallel. This picnic party of Jack's, while given ostensibly as an honor to her guest, might nevertheless be taken as a compliment, and as a delicious augur of the future, to herself and her daughter Letty. And for the present, the sight of the broad back of Mrs. Borridaile on the seat before her, which every few moments changed to the vision of an amiably smiling face, seemed quite enough to fill her cup of bliss. To say nothing of the dashing Kitty

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Marsten, or the polo champion she had brought with her, or of the celebrated senator who was for a few days honoring Stormcliff with his presence—Tomlinson of Virginia, a power in Copper, and associated with “Gentleman Jim” in the colossal B. & W. combine.

The start was somewhat delayed by the Grand Duchess Varvara. Not indeed in consequence of the indisposition of last night, of which her bright eyes and cheeks bore not the slightest trace; but because she refused to mount to the box-seat till her pet Vassily (who made himself as limp and as heavy as possible for the occasion) had been hoisted there before her. As he showed his teeth at any groom who attempted to touch him, this manœuvre was one of some difficulty. Finally, however, between Jack and the picturesque Petroff, the gigantic dog was squeezed in behind the dashboard. With a light foot his affectionate mistress followed him. Jack cracked his whip, the grooms let go the horses’ heads, and they were off.

Despite her recent depression, the Grand Duchess seemed in the lightest spirits. “How nicely you drive!” she said to Jack, who now and then, on level stretches and straightaway

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slopes, was able to turn beatific eyes from his restive, flying team to the charming face at his side. To tell the truth, his guest of honor was this morning well worth the trouble of an occasional glance. Her white lace coat, with its large pearl buttons, gave a knowing, coachman-like look to her appearance. From her ears the sapphires gave back the morning sun; while on her dark head a great blue bird seemed to have settled down from the sky, and poised with bright wings outstretched. And from under this marvellous head-gear, with its pale-blue floating veil, her deep eyes looked out with the limpid, transparent blue of the midsummer zenith above them.

“How well you manage them!” she said, “and what ducks of horses. Boris, my brother-in-law, thinks he knows how to drive a four-in-hand. But compared with you, sacred blue! he is no better than a Finland fisherman. Yes, I must learn. For when I’m commanded home to Lithuania (which may happen any day, you know!) I intend to have a rig exactly like this, and learn to drive it myself. Though the roads are so frightful I shall have to order all my peasants out to work for a year and a day, to make something for my coach to run on. Then

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when that is done I 'll send for you to come over, monsieur, and give me lessons. Will you?"

"Will I!" answered Jack. And the Grand Duchess colored faintly as she went on:

"Very well, then, that is settled. You must wear a furred blouse, such as my Petroff has, but the gentleman's kind of course instead of the serf's (is n't that kind of me?). And you will wear a short hunting-sword, and kill a great many bears, and drink a gallon of *vodka* every evening. And in between, you can teach me to make four horses do the work of one. Yes, you 'll be very Russian, monsieur. No, what is your name? Jack, is it not? Yes, that is the English for Ivan, I know that! And your father's name, monsieur? Alexander? Then I shall call you Ivan Alexandrovitch, is n't that delightful? And I will wear my hair braided down my back with strings of pearls, and a short green hunting-skirt, and you shall call me Varvara Feodorovna. Won't that be thrilling? And if it only were n't for the censor, we might have paragraphs put about you in the Petersburg papers, the same way that the papers here are printing things about me. Have you seen the papers this morning?"

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Was there an hysterical note to her gaiety? Jack asked himself, as he nodded assent to her last careless question, and then paid for his momentary aberration by narrowly missing collision with a passing automobile. The Grand Duchess, with a little nervous laugh, swept on with her ready chatter.

“They are delicious, the papers this morning, after Madame Kitty’s Jungle Mysteries!—‘No end smart was the Grand Duchess Varvara, in a gown of gold tissue, done in diamonds and pearls.’ Do you hear that, Vassily? Your little mistress is no end smart. Are n’t you pleased to hear it? So, for fear that they should n’t hear at home what a success I am making, I just made Petroff tie up a large bundle of journals this morning, and direct them, ‘For His Imperial Majesty, Official Business!’ and if ever they get past the censor, then I would give my sapphire ear-rings to be there, and see poor dear Nicholas’s face when he looks at them! And then—though probably he has done it already, with my dear friend the ambassador turning up last week to tell tales on me—then he will send for Count Witte and the Chief of the Secret Police and all the Imperial Guards, and they will send a cable to poor little Varvara:

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‘His Imperial Majesty commands your immediate presence!’ Though, ah! thanks to the kind Heaven, it has n’t come yet—and I’m here, and I’m going to have a cigarette, and I’m so happy, flying along between these sweet-smelling woods and this beautiful blue river! Oh, Ivan Alexandrovitch, is n’t it too delightful, just to think that we’re alive!’

Jack’s reply, though possessing no epigrammatic brilliancy, was brief and to the point. Already the sinister warning of last night had been thrust into some unheeded corner of his brain. It was all very well to warn a man how he should give his heart—but suppose that heart had already been given? Clearly, the wise man’s part was to obtain as much compensation of present joy as possible to pay for the melancholy days to come. After all, it was two whole weeks before the gray clouds would cover the sun, and the mysterious obligations of her life would close over the Grand Duchess and take her away forever. Meanwhile, here was her lovely face close beside him, the intoxication of her gay philosophy in his ear—yes, come what might in the future, for the present moment it was too delightful, merely to be alive!

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In a tilting whirl that set centrifugal force at defiance, the flying coach left the highroad and dashed down a long, fir-bordered avenue. A moment later, four glistening beasts had drawn themselves up quivering before the *porte cochère* of a little shingled bungalow. Jack, leaping to the ground, welcomed his guests.

There was a few moments' wait before luncheon, while the ladies powdered their slightly sunburned noses, and the gentlemen discussed the comparative merits of four-in-hands and of gasoline, and the price of real estate along the river. Mr. Rumbold, taking in his host's little place with a keen eye, decided it was a good investment of capital; and had already bought the land, built on it and sold it again at a hundred-per-cent profit, before his little wife came tripping in with her energetic smile and her ecstasies.

“So delightful, this little nook!” she gushed at Jack. “As I was saying to your dear aunt just now, the privacy of it, the exclusiveness of it, is just its greatest charm! For in a club-house, no matter how careful one is, there are always nobodies and parvenus, and that sort of people, ready to squeeze in if the doors are open no more than a crack! But to have a little

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box of one's own, where one can have one's own circle all to one's self—it 's a delicious idea, is n't it, Varvara, *chérie*?"

The lady addressed smiled at Jack. "Like my little place in Lithuania, that I was telling you of," she said. "Only if *we* leave the doors wide open, the bears come in. Are there any bears among these pine trees of yours, Ivan Alexandrovitch, and shall we have them broiled for the *déjeuner*?"

Prince Debreczin interposed, in his smooth and drawling tones, that always slurred the *th* and trilled the *r*, "Your Russian bear is not so easily turned into steaks, madame! He is, regrettably, very much alive, and his paw has a long reach."

It was beastly bad taste of Debreczin, Jack Borridaile told himself indignantly, to twit the poor girl with the fear of the sudden recall from her August Cousin which formed the confessed and obvious dread of her life at this time. That she felt the hit was obvious. Her glistening white teeth came down into her lip, which had turned a shade paler, and she turned away from the Hungarian with a sudden shrug.

"You forget, monsieur, the Russian bear is an old friend of mine! And if I see that paw

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of his reach itself out after me, then I am stupid as my own feet if I cannot metamorphose its touch into a love-pat. Or, perhaps, some kind friend would chase him away. Are you a good shot, Ivan Alexandrovitch?"

Beneath the lightness of her tone there was a curious hint of an intensity which approached passion. And at the mock ferocity of her last words her teeth came together in an emphatic click which struck oddly upon some half-recalled chord of Jack's memory. When was it he had heard it before, that half-barbaric dental reinforcement of the speaker's earnestness? Not so long ago, surely; and the little gesture, though slight, was curiously characteristic.

It was not till two hours later, however, that he had an opportunity to ask that question of himself again; the time from one o'clock till three being most completely and satisfactorily filled by the elaborate process of luncheon. The table was spread on the wide, shaded veranda built out over the blue water of the river. As the host had provided his friends not only with a lunch but with an appetite, conversation at first burned low. Even the Grand Duchess, neglecting her beloved cigarette-case,

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munched bread and almonds and artichokes in comparative silence.

It was a remark of Mrs. Borridaile's that first broke in upon this comfortable tranquillity. Leaning across the table with a benevolent smile: "I am glad to see, my dear Princess," she said, "that you have quite recovered your color and your spirits to-day, after the excitement of last night. I'm afraid her tricks were too much for you, that little humbug-woman of Kitty's!"

Now of all remarks calculated to scatter discomfort in varying degrees through the company, this one was most fortunately chosen. Mrs. Rumbold and Mr. Lushington, who remained quite in the dark concerning the nature of last night's interview, trembled lest the nefarious skill of the fortune-teller had in any way imperilled their darling secret. The subject thus approached was an unwelcome one also to Mrs. Marsten, who viewed with vague alarm the revelation to her cousin Jack of the "perfectly killing joke" which she had so delightedly helped to play on him last night. And to Prince Debreczin, and to the girl on whose imperial masquerade he had staked so much, the subject passed from the region of uncomfortable jesting

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to the spaces of possible and very real tragedy. The latter was, however, the first to recover herself.

“How good you are to me, dear madame,” she addressed Mrs. Borridaile gratefully; “it was only my foolish migraine that overcame me last night—the same old malady that I suffered from, if you remember, on the night of Madame Rumbold’s fête. But as for that ridiculous little Lal Deesa, or however she called herself, I promise you, *she* had nothing to do with it!—unless I might have been taken ill from mere disgust at the stupidity of her performance. Indian bangles and an Egyptian *yashmak!* And, above all, the stupid way she poured the ink! Ah, when I remember the woman at Nijni Novgorod—”

“The ink won’t come off; it *was* stupidly poured!” murmured Mrs. Rumbold plaintively. All the rest of the party examined their palms in a mechanical gesture. Jack laughed as he extended the dim purple surface which lined his own square brown fist, to meet the stained hands which came from every side of the table for comparison. The Grand Duchess, however, turned away to the dog who nestled as usual against her skirts.

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“Here, Vassily, give your paw! It’s the fashion, *chéri*, don’t you see? Let me see what I can read in your five toes—as much, sacred blue! as that brown monkey read for me last night. Bah! the little imbecile!”

Again, as she bent over her dog, her teeth came together in that oddly emphatic little click of contempt. Where had he heard it before? Jack asked himself. But at all points where the bewildering Varvara was concerned, it seemed to him that he must be content to be left in the dark. For instance, this pretence of hers that the Hindu woman of last night had said nothing to disturb her. What could it have been, that was worth such careful pains in denial?

All these questions came back again over Jack’s mind as, an hour later, he sat with the lady who gave them rise, alone on the piazza of the bungalow. The others, at Mr. Rumbold’s earnest solicitation, had gone to inspect the possible eligibility of a field adjoining, which struck him as exactly the kind of thing he wanted for his imitation of Jack’s bungalow. Mrs. Rumbold had been very urgent for the company and advice of their host. Prince Debreczin, however, with an energy which de-

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feated even that of a match-making mamma, decided that the Grand Duchess was pale and must stay out of the heat; and that, obviously, her host must stay with her. After all, they would be gone no more than twenty minutes, or a half-hour at the outside! So before any one had time to dispute his decision, the determined Hungarian had gathered his forces and swept them together up the sandy driveway and across a stony field to the barbed-wire fence and beyond; while on the deserted piazza Varvara sat staring at the sparkling water below them, and Jack sat staring at her.

The exact reasons of Debreczin in making for his host the opportunity for this tête-à-tête with the lady whom he himself admired, Jack could not fathom. It was plain, however, that the Hungarian was a good chap; and that, in spite of the many baffling puzzles presented by the situation and by the lady who shared it with him, it would be the part of a fool not to profit by the moment's happiness which it offered to him. And his heart closed in a sudden pang of amazement as he realized how dear to him, how perilously dear, was this fleeting moment; how small seemed to him the hopes and ambitions of a few weeks ago, when

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put in the balance against the profound joy inspired in him by this woman's presence. He smiled grimly to himself as he remembered the smug contempt with which, time and again, he had watched other men make ducks and drakes of life, friends, career, everything—all for the sake of some woman. He himself, secure in his own strength, had called them weak, had smilingly declared them lacking in a sense of proportion. Now he understood at last where the disproportion lay—not in the weakness of one feeling, but in the horrible strength of the other. It was in dismay, yet also in a kind of triumph, that he looked into his own spirit and saw there the good-will to commit any folly, any desperate waste of opportunity, if thereby—but at the keenness of that thought his imagination halted short. What business had he spinning love dreams with an imperial princess as their heroine?

“If you don't mind,” the sweetness of her own voice broke in suddenly on his reverie, “we're going to sit on the rug, Vassily and I. Come, my treasure! You shall sit on the bear-skin here beside your little mistress, and spoil her dress with your paws, and she'll rub your ears for you as much as you like. Do you

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disapprove of people sitting on furs instead of chairs, Ivan Alexandrovitch? Then, I warn you, you 'd better not come to Lithuania!"

"You can't take back that invitation, Princess!" responded Jack with a smile. She looked up at him a bit strangely. "I don't want to," she said under her breath, and his heart pounded.

Then as he took in his breath for an answer which might express, so nearly as he dared, something of the feeling with which he looked forward to her hospitality, he was aware of a sudden change in her mood. "But for all my diversions," she said in a sudden embarrassment, "I must not forget I am subject to the will of others. I am not like you—you come, you go, you are happy as you please and in your own way. Ah, *mon Dieu!*—what it must be to be free like you, monsieur!"

Jack surveyed her with something like grimness in his gray eyes. "Free like me, yes! You know the old saying, Princess? '*C'est une grande folie de vouloir être sage tout seul.*' And if it's foolish to be good all alone, how much vainer a privilege to be free all alone! If freedom meant the power of going out in a boat all by one's self, or climbing a mountain

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top alone, and then shouting swear-words, and hurling dynamite bombs, and drinking red wine with fish, to one's heart's content, then indeed I'm a happy son of the sweet land of liberty. But unfortunately, you see, the chance to be free all alone—the way we human beings are made, it does n't do us very much good!"

He picked a pebble from the top of a flower-pot near by, and viciously hurled it into the river below. How much of his rhodomontade did the Grand Duchess understand? She was watching him with a singular expression in her large eyes. Even as her glance met Jack's, she opened her lips to speak, then closed them again. Her embarrassment was evident. In her very stillness there was something strained, something almost watchful. Jack was dimly aware of an odd sensation that not only was she on guard against him, but that somewhere in the depths of her consciousness she was putting him on his guard against herself.

"Of course you are right, monsieur," she said with hesitation. "So long as we are alone—and I have had full experience of *that* amusement, I own to you—how is it possible for good or evil, or life itself, to exist except in our thoughts? And what does it matter what our

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thoughts are, so long as we lack courage to put them into action?"

"But you don't lack courage, Princess!" Jack responded fervently. She glanced up at him with a smile. What a picture she made, he said to himself, as she sat with her hands clasped about her knees, her blue eyes laughing at him above a froth of whiteness—dog, dress, and creamy bearskin all blended into one pale background for the soft brightness of her face. What was there in the delicate abandon of her attitude, as she bent from him to push the eager Vassily from her—what was there that reminded him of something—of somebody?

As though disowning the serious tone which their conversation had taken, she addressed her dog with a sudden tremulous briskness—"Vassily, little villain! I said you might spoil my dress—I never said you might spoil my poor wrist as well! Can't you be careful of those long nails of yours? Come, if you do this again, sacred blue! I'll tell my Cousin Nicholas, and we'll soon have you swinging a pick and answering to a number in the Urals. How would you like that, spoiled one, *hein?*"

"But your wrist!" cried Jack in a dismay of sympathy, as he bent over the delicate white

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arm which, laughing nervously, she extended to him for pity. But it was not on the faintly red mark above the blue veins of the left wrist thus held out to him, that his eyes rested. The glance was as delicate, as fleeting as the little frightened look with which her eyes suddenly swept his face. But the moment sufficed. He saw that the palm was pink, its lines a clear and unstained scarlet. When she had claimed to have shared along with the rest of the party in last night's fantastic rite of the ink-pool, it was plain she had not spoken the truth.

Jack's brain moved swiftly. He knew now where he had encountered them, the slender figure curled on the barbarism of the fur rug, the impatient click of the teeth. He knew, and her eyes owned that he knew. For one instant, however, she struggled against the fatal admission that her own hand had made.

"I used pumice on it," she said feebly, "and a very excellent soap that Madame Rumbold gave me. That's—that's the only reason that I don't show the purple in my palm to-day, like you others."

"Certainly, madame!" returned Jack, with a grave bow. Why should she thus fib to him,

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in addition to the very questionable humor of the original jest? Why should she deny the evidence of that unstained rosy palm, of her own artfully contrived absence last night, of the thousand little points of physical resemblance which his suddenly awakened brain now seized upon? How dull he had been, to allow himself to be thus imposed on! And yet he must acknowledge the astounding skill of the performance. Beyond a doubt, her Imperial Highness possessed gifts of mimicry which, in a humbler rank of life, might have been as good as a fortune to her. The game had been amazingly well played. But still, why play it at all?

As though reading in his stern face the futility of further pretence, the girl burst into a peal of nervous laughter. "The game is made—monsieur wins!" she cried. "I own it, oh, I own it! But they wagered me I could n't do it, you understand—Prince Debreczin and Madame Kitty and the others, yesterday when I was telling them of a silly joke I had once played on my husband and his brother Boris. I dressed up like a red-headed Tartar singing-woman, and came in and played the zither for them for a whole evening—and no one even

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guessed! So when I told our friends of it last night, they wagered I could n't do it again. And I said I could. So they offered me a jewelled dog-collar for Vassily—I could n't resist *that!* Especially as, if you recognized me, I was to pay up with my sapphire ear-rings and six Russian songs. But, as you see, I 'm still wearing my ear-rings. And Vassily gets his new collar to-morrow!"

The girl spoke rapidly, feverishly, heaping excuse upon excuse as she went along. Jack, however, was silent. In his mind he was reconstructing the scene of last night, viewing it from the new standpoint of the identity of the veiled Nautch girl with the very woman whom he loved. The thing seemed impossible! And yet the little gestures, the little twist of the figure—"I congratulate you on your make-up, Princess," he said slowly, "and on—on your gifts."

She disclaimed his compliment with a little uneasy flutter. "Don't give me the credit," said she swiftly, "it was n't my cleverness—it was Prince Debreczin, you see, who contrived the entrances and exits, and your cousin, Madame Kitty, who dressed me up. Not badly done, *hein?* And so very generous of

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them, in view of the fact that my success was to them the loss of a dog-collar!"

Still speechless with amazement and perplexity, Jack continued to stare at her. The brown arms—the dark, shining eyes—yes, even when viewed in the broad light of day it was plain that the dazzling eyes might, with the distended pupil of a half-light, pass easily for black. The calm, white-skinned Varvara—the chirping brown grasshopper of last night—they were one and the same woman! The notion seemed inconceivable. The girl's next gesture, however, gave corroboration that placed the fact beyond a doubt. Opening the little gold bag that hung on her wrist, she extracted therefrom a ten-dollar note and passed it to him.

"Your fee, monsieur," she observed, smiling faintly. "I had to accept your generosity, or betray my assumed character. Of course I was intending to give it back when I told you all about it."

Jack breathed in sudden relief. Of course, even if the accidental detail of her pink palm had not betrayed her, she was intending to tell him of the joke in any case! To be sure, the advantage which she had taken over him

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might seem just a bit unfair; but still a joke was a joke, and he was not the sort to find it less amusing because it was on himself. He smiled cheerfully at the money which she extended to him.

"Princess, is this fair? When a man has paid honest money for value received, it's awkward to make him take it back—I beg you, let me subscribe the price of one turquoise to that new collar of Vassily's!"

In spite of his light tone, the girl flushed scarlet. "Please don't think of it in any way but as a stupid joke, that I was prevailed into playing," she said uneasily; "and please—please don't remember any of the ridiculous things I said to you, merely to fill in the time."

But Jack's brain was already busy with the remembered words of last night. And as they came back to him, it seemed to him that there stirred, below his perplexity and amazement, a little glimmer of understanding. The whole prank struck him as unjustifiable, undignified, unworthy of the woman that he believed Varvara to be. But then, he was ignorant of the ways of princesses, and of the latitude that might be allowed to them—had she not

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spoken of this disguise-business as one which she had successfully played before? And beneath the childish, reckless play, was it not possible that there stirred motives as deep as the kindness of her own heart?

The foolish passion which, as he well knew, he had not been able to conceal from his friends or from the gossiping tongues of Newport—was it conceivable that he had hidden it from the very eyes by which it had been kindled? Yes, she understood, of course; and more fully than he, more fully than any one who had not lived the court life which she knew, she realized its utter hopelessness. And when it came to the consideration of barriers, why should he flatter himself that there were none but those offered by her imperial rank—would not her own indifference be as effective an obstacle? Yes, it had been kind of her, to give him that warning; it had been like her gentle consideration, to provide a disguise which might save him the pain of knowing it came from her. "*Beware, sahib, how you give your heart!*" What a curious finality, what a deadly weight was given to these words, by the knowledge that it was her lips that had spoken them to him. He squared his shoulders. Very well!

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At least she should not have the distress of seeing the pain which he was suffering at that moment.

“There’s no need to ask me to forget what you said, Princess,” he said slowly; “you gave me some excellent advice, I remember. It’s better, after all, that I should remember that, is n’t it?”

Her scared eyes met his for an instant, then she looked away. “I’m afraid—it is,” she answered in a low tone. Her hands were clenched in the white fur of the rug upon which she sat. Her embarrassment was so deep and painful that despite the temptation offered Jack by her obvious emotion, he bravely resisted the advantage given him. In words as nearly direct as it had been possible for her to make them, she had forbidden him to make love to her. Very well, again! She should see that his love was deep enough even to hold itself in silence for her sake.

With determined lightness he turned the conversation. “But, upon my word, Princess, you managed the business cleverly! That brown make-up, and your talk about Afghanistan and the English guns—you certainly did take me in. And, sacred blue!—if I may bor-

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row your own expression—how you did lay it into your own dear native country, Princess!"

Would he never succeed in fathoming the depth of contradictions offered him by the woman before him? Jack asked himself. A woman, and a beautiful one, that was bad enough—but a princess! Now this last remark, which he had designed specially to draw the conversation from the over-poignant matters to which it had drifted—who could foresee that this reference to the political nonsense which they had chattered last night should touch her, or so it seemed, in the very quick of her soul? Her vivid tint burned to a crimson almost disfiguring; she took in her breath with a little gasp, and it seemed to Jack that the tears were in her eyes. Now why on earth—? And her words when she spoke were more enigmatic still.

"You despise me, I see," she said in a low tone; "but at least don't laugh at me!"

"Dear madame! laugh at you!"—as Jack's tongue stumbled over its own utterances in his eager disclaimer of her amazing words, there came to him a sudden light. Of course the violent diatribe against her own country, behind which she had so successfully masked her identity—it was this memory, stirred by his

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last careless words, which awoke this agony of self-reproach in her. His heart warmed toward this evidence of her loyal nature.

“Madame, I assure you that I understand. It was not you yourself that disowned your beloved Russia, it was the little wandering Afghan whose part you so skilfully played. But that you yourself, in your own person, would deny the land of your birth—you would n’t believe it of me, would you? So why, then, should I believe it of you?”

The cheerful reassurance of his words seemed to strike an answering chord. The girl straightened herself, and for one moment her unfathomable blue glance held his own.

“You are right, monsieur, you read me rightly! It was, of course, the thought that I had denied my country which came to me with so sudden a shock—for even in jest one shouldn’t do that sort of thing, you understand.” Her voice broke for an instant. On her face lay the shadow of some unnamed pain as she went on with sudden energy. “My poor Russia! She’s been slandered, she’s been ridiculed—a bogey, an ogre, a victim and a laughing-stock, by turns. But now, when, if ever, she needs the love of her children, am I to turn my back

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on her? No, I give her my devotion, I serve with both hands, in open and in secret." She broke off suddenly with a little laugh. "So now you are warned, monsieur. It is, you see, a case of 'Love me, love my dog,' as you say, you other English. But in this case, you see, my dog is not Vassily here, but Russia!"

Jack drew in a long breath. Did she realize, he asked himself, how utterly these last words of hers were undoing the work of those cold notes of reason and warning which she herself had sounded only a few moments ago? But he tried to speak lightly. "There are some conditions, Princess," he replied, "under which it would be easy to love every acre of the Czar's dominions, from Poland to China!"

She looked at him. "There spoke the diplomat," she said with an odd hesitation in her voice; "if one knew, now, just how many acres that included—especially on the Chinese side!" He did not speak and she went on with a little laugh. "But my poor Russia—she walks very lame on that leg, I'm afraid, and will walk lamer yet when you and your Japanese friends are done with her, monsieur!"

Jack stared at her. The odd turn which the conversation had taken last night, in its

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curious approach to the diplomatic business which now filled the working hours of his days—this could not fail to come back to him. Nor, on the other hand, could he forget the scrupulous eagerness with which, when the conversation drifted near the danger-point, the disguised princess had cut the subject short. After all, was not her concern the most natural thing in the world? She, who openly testified to her devotion to her unfortunate country, and her interest in its welfare. He spoke with a smile.

“So your case of ‘Love me, love my dog,’ means a love of your fatherland, Princess. And the love of your Russia means a hatred of all Russia’s enemies. And that includes—what?”

His words were light, but the tone in which they were spoken showed the depth of feeling which lay behind them. This was the first time that the word of love had been passed between them. He could not but feel it an epoch in their conversation with each other. She leaned toward him from the fur rug on which she sat. A sudden light was in her eyes, and through his blood a mounting recklessness rose up to answer it.

“And if I told you what it included—would it make any difference, monsieur?”

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“Try me, Princess!”

“Ah, if I dared believe you!” she sighed, in a little wistful breath more irresistible than her smile. Jack caught himself wondering at the ardor of conviction that had taken possession of his soul. There was no longer any question of struggling. It was not a mere impression that he faced, but a state of mind, fixed and unalterable. In the eyes, the voice, the responsive soul of the woman before him, lay the whole value and savor of life. Apart from her nothing mattered, except the opportunity to do her service. This attitude of mind, had any one foretold it to him a month ago, he would have contemptuously pronounced as impossible. But now he knew it for a fact. Whatever she might demand of him, it was inconceivable that the price should be too great a one to pay in return for a smile from these beloved eyes.

“You may believe me, Princess.” Jack spoke quietly, but the intensity of his tone was strange in his own ears. She leaned toward him. The fire of her blue eyes shone dark and bright, reminding him of the eyes which last night had glimmered at him above the yellow *yashmak*. Now, as then, their lustrous intensity had upon him a strange effect, almost hypnotic.

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For the first time he realized that in yielding his soul to the influence of the beloved woman, it is not the weakness of a man's nature but its very strength which plays him traitor. Whatever the Grand Duchess Varvara might ask of him he did not know; but whatever it might be he knew that he must yield it, simply because he could never face the pain which her frown in her averted look might give him.

"Whatever I 'd ask of you, you 'd give me ?"

"Yes, Princess."

"Whatever I asked you to tell me, you 'd tell me ?"

"I did n't say that, Princess—but—it 's hard to imagine anything that I know that I would n't be proud and glad to have you know too, if it interested you!"

She continued to look steadfastly at him. In her blue eyes there was a singular expression, urgent and yet tortured. What could be hidden behind the mystery of those eyes, Jack asked himself, to cause so evident and painful a commotion of soul? What, in heaven's name, could a Romanoff Grand Duchess have to ask of him, John Borridaile? To be sure she had hinted at some favor to her country. Was it possible? Bah, the idea was unthinkable,

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absurd! The one thing that was certain was the irresistible sweetness of her presence, the ineffable joy of her nearness to him. On the white bearskin, her little hand was very close to his own. The faint sea-breeze, drawing up the river, blew out a strand of her wavy black hair. The voices of the returning party came to them audibly from the fir-trees behind the bungalow. She put up her hand to capture the waving lock, and Jack saw to his amazement that the fingers trembled like the nostrils of an over-ridden race horse.

“What is it, Princess?” he cried desperately. “Whatever it is you want of me, remember you have only to tell me what it is, and it is yours. Ask, ask!”

She smiled at him. To his amazement he saw that her eyes were full of tears. She took a long breath, then the point of her pink tongue touched her pale, dry lips. It seemed as though her whole being, mind and soul together, were resolutely throwing off the grip of some violent and deadly constriction.

“No,” she said in a little voice, “I can’t—I can’t. That is, I have no favor to ask of you, monsieur. You are good, you are kind; while I—ah, I am wicked as the capital sins, I own

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it, but not wicked enough to take advantage of loyalty such as yours. I have nothing to ask of you—nothing, nothing, do you understand?"

She jumped to her feet, and turned with a determined lightness.

"Here you are all back again—be the welcome ones, dear friends! Prince Debreczin, have you added to your estates? Flora *chérie*, your veil is blown to one side—you must let me arrange it. Yes, thank you, my wretched migraine is quite vanished. Ask poor Monsieur Jack here, he will tell you that I have quite deafened him with my *bêtises*, this half hour past—you come just in time to rescue him! Time to start for home, you say? Very well—one cigarette, one little cigarette again, and then *avanti!*"

XII.

IT was not till the homeward drive that Prince Debreczin, patiently awaiting his turn, found opportunity for any private conversation with the lady whose personality held for him so keen and significant an interest.

Jack Borridaile, who had monopolized her society on the outward course, might indeed have been not quite so rapturously happy as his guests; for by an astute piece of manœuvring on the part of her mamma, it was Miss Letty, in a thick white lace veil (to save what she had of complexion) and a large white ostrich boa, who shared the box with the coachman on this return trip. (“She is *so* ambitious to learn four-in-hand driving, the dear child!”)

Thus it fell out that the Grand Duchess, with her blue hat and her enormous white dog, bestowed herself in the back seat of the vehicle. Her devoted Hungarian clambered immediately to the vacant place by her side. In the privacy thus assured, and guaranteed moreover by the beat of hoofs and the rush of the flying air,

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the prince bent suddenly toward the girl at his side.

“And now, madame—now at last, beyond a doubt, you have news for me?”

The girl shrank away from him. Then with an obvious effort she forced herself to reply:

“I have tried, monsieur—oh, I have tried my best! But in what way can I obtain for you the information that you desire? Here in this city my every step is watched by the journalists. And as for the Commission itself—as I have already told you, my Petroff has cultivated intimacy with one of the underfootmen at Borridaile Court, where the sittings take place. He finds they sit with doors and windows wide open; there is not even the chance of listening!”

To this stream of hurried excuses, the prince listened with an air of contempt which one uses toward a wilfully stupid child. “So much is granted, madame; with these difficulties I am perfectly familiar, as you know. But when I ask you what news—”

Still the girl fenced feverishly with his meaning.

“But what can I do, monsieur? Every step of mine is watched and guarded! This

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recent foolish agitation about the dynamiters—it has made things ten times worse for me."

For an instant her ruse succeeded in distracting her enemy's attention from the painful subject in hand.

"The Anarchists? You speak seriously of the Anarchists, madame? Ah! They murdered my queen, it is true. But, bah! here in America I mock myself not badly of them and of their dynamite!"

The little fat senator on the seat before them, catching the last word of this speech, removed his cigar from his mouth and turned:

"The Anarchists? You are right, Prince, a set of crazy bums. They do say some of them have been seen lurking about Newport this year—Morrow, who served a term at Auburn last year for wrecking a peanut-stall with a torpedo; Gebwykurtz, who did an Anarchist play a while ago in New York, and was egged off the stage. Don't be scared, Duchess, America 'll take good care of you!"

The Grand Duchess bowed sweetly. "A thousand thanks, monsieur the Senator! Believe me, I am not afraid." Then as the stout little legislator turned back again to his gay conversation with the sprightly Mrs. Marsten,

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the girl's voice sank again to a tremulous whisper.

"I said I was not afraid, monsieur, but I lied. I am afraid—horribly afraid, of you."

The prince bowed suavely. "You flatter me, madame!" Then, as a sudden snaky gleam shot into his heavy-lidded eyes, "Name of a name, madame, if you continue thus to trifle with me, you will find that you have reason for your fear of me! If you continue to throw away the occasions that I prepare for you as you wasted the opportunity of last night—as, I clearly perceive, you have wasted the opportunity of just now!"

With a little show of resolution, the girl defended herself. "What could I do?" she responded softly. "You see—he recognized me."

"He recognized your disguise of last night?" In a curious suggestion of a snarl, the Hungarian's red lips drew back from his gold-spotted teeth. With a little quivering gesture of alarm, the girl hastened to reassure him.

"But there's no harm done. I told him it was a joke that we all banded together to play on him. The wager was a new dog-collar for the wolf-hound. I must not forget to mention it to Mrs. Rumbold. But, you see, passing it

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all off as a joke made matters doubly difficult to-day—”

The prince fastened his eye upon her. “Tell me the truth, madame! Had you been willing to do so, could you not have extracted the desired facts from this young man just now?”

The girl clenched her hands, while in an agony of helpless self-revelation her eyes travelled to the broad-shouldered back that towered before them on the box-seat. Then as her painful gaze went back again to the eyes which the Hungarian bent upon her, she read in them an open meaning that brought the blood back into her face like a spoken insult.

“As your own eyes acknowledge, madame, there is your power! All Newport has remarked it. Do you really believe he could deny you anything you asked of him? Come, between us there are no disguises. Could you imagine him saying *no* to any request of yours?”

In the midst of the hopelessness, the degradation into which her love had fallen, there shot for an instant through the girl’s soul the proud consciousness of the woman beloved. Jack’s love for her could never mean to her or to him anything but suffering; but, nevertheless, the cruelty neither of time nor of chance could ever

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rob her heart of the knowledge that once, at least, she had been as dear as she could wish to the man whom she loved. And in the very pride of that consciousness it was impossible for her to return to Debreczin's question any answer but the truth:

“No, monsieur!”

The Hungarian surveyed her in a kind of injured amazement.

“Name of a name, madame! Your audacity charms me. You own with frankness this young man is in your power; yet you refuse absolutely, not once, but again and again, to use the power which places him in your hands. Bah! Am I to understand you refuse to serve me—you prefer the alternative which I have offered you?”

The girl wet her lips and spoke painfully. The horror which his words awoke in her was written plainly in her twitching lips and hands.

“No, monsieur, no—I could n’t bear *that!*”

The prince smiled in sardonic relief. It was plain she was still in his power. “Then, my dear little friend,” he inquired smoothly, “will you have the goodness to tell me what you propose to do?”

The girl twisted her gloved hands together in her lap. “I don’t know—oh, I don’t know!

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It 's not that I refuse to serve you, monsieur. It 's hideous enough to think of myself as betraying my country's secrets to her enemies—but I deserve the punishment, and I 'd made up my mind to it. I 'll get you the report of the committee's proceedings, monsieur, if it 's possible—but, oh, not that way! Not by taking advantage of—an affection that has faith in me. If I ever thought that I could do it, I find that I was mistaken in myself. I 'm bad, I know, but I 'm not infamous. No, I can't do it that way, monsieur; I 've tried it and it 's impossible!"

The prince surveyed her down-bent head and shrinking form as the naturalist surveys a new mollusk that his skill has drawn up from the deep. "You amuse me, madame! At another time it might interest me to hear the intricacies of your conscience, and learn at just what point in intrigue and criminal imposture you draw the line. But at the moment, business presses. Listen, madame!" He leaned toward her with a whisper that cut like the flick of a whip. "It is an open secret the sittings of the Commission come to an end within the week. Furthermore, I had a cable from my chief in Petersburg this morning. He commends

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my use of you as our instrument; he guarantees the protection from the Russian press for which I asked him. But—he limits my time till Sunday!"

The girl took in her breath. "Till Sunday! And this is Thursday!"

The Hungarian nodded. "Thursday, yes! And so—I give you till Saturday."

Again the girl repeated the words mechanically after him, as though seeking to take in their meaning. "Till Saturday—and this is Thursday."

Debreczin's voice took on tones of a sudden, decisive harshness. "Here is my last word for you, madame! Hand me the desired information by Saturday noon—twelve o'clock of this coming Saturday, do you understand?—or my despatch concerning your identity goes, at one minute past twelve, to the bureau of the Associated Press in New York. Even Mr. Rumbold's millions, I fancy, would have difficulty in holding back so enormous, so delicious a scandal! So if you do not give me what I ask for, by Saturday noon, I advise you to glance at the headlines of the Saturday evening papers. I assure you they will interest you—you and Madame Rumbold!"

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Mrs. Marsten, turning in her seat with a little gay comment on the beauty of the view, exclaimed in sudden amazement at the girl's ghastly looks. "Princess, you are ill! This whirling around corners—here, take my vinaigrette!"

"Dear madame, it is nothing!" the white lips smiled at her courageously. "My ridiculous migraine! But I assure you I shall be better in a moment."

The amicable Hungarian bent toward her with kindly solicitude, as he took the offered flask of aromatic salts. "Yes, it is true, you are white, Princess! The strenuous amusements of America are wearing you out. Here, let me fold this rug behind you, so! The salts? Now you will be better."

Then as the others, with renewed expressions of concern, turned back again to their conversation, Debreczin's voice sank again to its former sibilant whisper. "Forty-four hours, that is, I give you till noon on Saturday!"

Suddenly into the girl's eyes sprang the light of a new and resolute flame. She sat up with sudden energy—"And suppose, monsieur, I give you the same! You hold my secret, it is true. But have you forgotten—I hold yours?"

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The prince's glance spoke his open enjoyment of this attempt at rebellion. "So you really fancy, madame," he observed tolerantly, "that before I took you into my confidence I had not weighed consequences?" Then as, staring, shaking under the keenness of this new disappointment, she sat listening to him, he went on triumphantly: "For, think—if you speak before Saturday to betray my secrets, together with those of Russia, will it not be to destroy with your own hand your character of Russian Grand Duchess? On the other hand, if you refuse my terms and speak on Saturday after I have shown the world what you are—*who will believe you?*"

The girl covered her quivering mouth with her hand. "You are very subtle, monsieur. I own, I have no choice but to serve you."

The prince smiled in obvious relief. "So you have come to your senses at last—bravo, madame!"

She answered him with dry lips. "What shall I do, monsieur? You know my limitations; show me the way, and I will serve you faithfully. But I warn you it must be by some less infamous methods than those which you have already furnished me!"

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The prince shrugged his shoulders in contempt. "Bah, your Anglo-Saxon blood! Had you been truly the Slav you claim to be, you would long ago have twisted him inside out like an old glove, this young man who adores you. Very well, since you reject my methods, this time I throw you on your own responsibility. I can do no more than suggest the opportunity—your own wit, if you possess any, must do the rest!"

His sneer passed over the girl's head like the summer air through which they flew. His opinion of her was a matter of profound indifference; her one thought, vital and poignant, was for the possible opportunity of releasing herself from this torturing bondage to him. "Very well, monsieur, what is it you suggest?"

Debreczin lowered his voice to an impressive whisper: "To-night, as you know, Mr. Rumbold gives a dinner—what they call here a stag dinner—in honor of his friend the little fat senator on the seat before us. Among the guests are the members of the Commission, American and Japanese. Mr. Borridaile, as secretary, will attend. Now, as I happen to know, the Commission has an extra session at seven o'clock—the dinner is at half-past eight.

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This means, of course, that from their sitting the Commission move straight to the dinner-table. After dinner—*eh bien, madame, after dinner things are not impossible!*”

The girl threw up her head recklessly. “Monsieur, what is the use of my hesitating any more? For a criminal impostor such as I am, these delicacies of conscience are a luxury out of reach. For the position in which I am placed I have no one to thank but myself; and so far as any sense of duty remains to me, it must be given first to the woman who has trusted me. Mrs. Rumbold has her faults, I admit. But when I think of the ruin which this exposure would mean to her—” She stopped short, with a violent shuddering. Then she resumed bravely: “No, monsieur, I ’ll serve you faithfully this time—not because I find treachery any easier than I did, but because I see that I have no choice. Just what means I will adopt I have no idea, but—if I see an opportunity I ’ll use it. And if I don’t see an opportunity, I ’ll make one!” She paused to reflect. “After dinner, as you say—but, listen, monsieur! One obstacle occurs to me. These plain-clothes men that have lately been such a restriction upon me—”

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The prince nodded encouragingly. "Have no fear, madame. All private police shall be withdrawn from the grounds. You have seen for yourself how the senator feels on the subject. We will speak to Mr. Rumbold, who to my certain knowledge regards the whole alarm as absurd. Trust me, the way shall be cleared and—what's the difficulty now, madame?"

The speaker's voice rose to the sharpness of a sudden peevish surprise. For the blue eyes before him, which had met his gaze in a dumb and miserable submission, were suddenly averted. The slight form crouched downward, the white cheek was pressed to Vassily's feathery ear. "What is it now, madame? Do you reject my terms, or have you seen a ghost?"

"Yes," she answered in a low tone, "I have seen a ghost, monsieur." Then, as his eyes followed hers to the crowded sidewalk of the glittering avenue down which they whirled, her voice recalled his attention sharply to the business in hand.

"Monsieur, I beg of you! If I succeed in extracting any information or laying hand on any papers, shall I give them over to you to-morrow?"

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At this practical indication of her willingness, Debreczin's eyes glistened as though success was already his. "To-morrow? No, the sooner the better. If possible, to-night!"

"To-night—but how?"

The prince considered the matter thoughtfully. "Telephone, messenger—all methods are likely to be unsafe. No, here is the best way. I will excuse myself from the dinner—an engagement, say, to play bridge at the Club! I will go there in my automobile. I will change my Inverness for a black raincoat which I left in the cloak-room last week. I will go to the pier, take a canoe and paddle back to Mr. Rumbold's harbor below. At the near end of the pergola, where we spoke together that first night, you will find me waiting. Upon my word, the situation becomes truly dramatic! You understand the arrangements, Princess?"

She nodded. All traces of her recent alarm had vanished, though her eyes still glanced backward like the eyes of one haunted. "The near end of the pergola at, say, twelve o'clock. Yes, it is understood!"

The coach whirled from the wide, thronged avenue into the white road that led between green lawns to the door of Stormcliff. As

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Debreczin noticed the tremulous shrinking of the fingers which for an instant were laid in his for the descent, he smiled grimly to himself. Then as the coachman, turning away from his restive team, came back to rejoin his imperial guest, the prince observed, with a smile which for once was devoid of all save satisfaction, the self-revealing glance which, like the sparkle of living sunshine, flashed between the two. A passionate longing, a clinging tenderness, a perfect trust—in both pairs of young eyes, his keen gaze read no less. And he touched his cold lips with his gloved hand, to control their smile of triumph.

“She can deny him nothing,” was the thought that ran tingling through his brain, “and he—he can deny her nothing!” He turned to follow the party to the tennis-lawn, where tea-tables were spread. “On Sunday,” he resolved piously, “I go to Mass. For beyond doubt I shall have the wherewithal for thankfulness!”

At the playful solicitation of her imperial guest, Mrs. Rumbold accompanied that lady to her apartment when the time came to dress for dinner. Maids were dismissed, doors were examined and locked. “What’s the matter,

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Miss Hooper?" cried her employer sharply. "For heaven's sake, don't tell me you have any bad news for me!"

The girl, standing humbly before her, replied in tones of utter weariness, "No, not bad news exactly, Mrs. Rumbold, but—I promised, you know, to let you know if anything turned up that might be dangerous—"

The lady addressed turned pale under her rosy tints. "What? Do you mean to say—"

"No, no, nothing definitely ruinous as yet! But I saw some one on the street this afternoon —some one that I thought I recognized."

Mrs. Rumbold took in her breath sharply. "Some one that knows you as *Angélique Hooper*?"

The girl nodded. "Just a boy from my old home down East—a boy that I was brought up with."

The immensity of Mrs. Rumbold's relief brought the blood back to her little powdered face again. "Oh, is that all? Well, if a person of *that* sort tried to make trouble, we can settle the matter with a check, I fancy! Let me know if you see him again, or if he tries to make trouble. And now—how about Prince De-breczin, my dear?"

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Mrs. Rumbold's tone was tense with a very real anxiety. The girl shook her head painfully.

"No news yet, Mrs. Rumbold. But, I hope, to-morrow I may tell you that everything is safe."

Mrs. Rumbold surveyed her with a little hard smile. "I hope so, indeed," she said coldly. "I never bargained to live with a sword like this hanging over me. So if you can't report some reasonable progress to-morrow, it will be time for Mr. Rumbold and me to take a hand! And meanwhile—come, it's time to dress for the dinner at Mrs. Seton-Jones's!"

XIII.

TO the deep regret of everybody concerned, the Grand Duchess was unable to accompany her hostess to the dinner-dance that was to follow the coaching-party. The long exposure to the August sun had given her a nervous headache which showed itself plainly in her white cheeks and nervously twitching hands. The doctor, hastily summoned, recommended quiet and absolute repose. Fortunately, Mr. Rumbold's dinner-party to the senator and the commissioners was separated from the apartments of the imperial lady by something like a quarter of a mile of masonry and heavily decorated space. Mrs. Rumbold, with affectionate solicitude and many injunctions to the maids in charge of her guest, swept off to her evening of pleasure.

It might have been ten o'clock that the Grand Duchess, under the ministering hands of her maid, fell into a deep sleep. The servant, glad enough to be released for enjoyment of

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the gaieties below, nodded to her companion; and together they tip-toed from the room.

By eleven o'clock the dinner and informal speech-making was over. In Mr. Rumbold's celebrated pool-room, with its dozen green tables and huge, glittering buffet, the guests disported themselves after the manner of men more or less hard worked, relaxing in the warmth of a summer night. Glistening white shirt-sleeves and a glistening black cigar, a long slim cue and a long iced drink seemed, to judge by the appearance of the roomful, to represent the moment's idea of solid comfort. From the responsibilities of the day, as from the constraints of female presence, they were now freed. Even had their eyes, dazzled with the glistening whiteness of the room and fixed upon the spinning ivory balls, been able to pierce the vine-embowered gloom of the veranda without, they would hardly have found in the presence of an inquisitive servant-maid any ground for concern or even for surprise.

Upstairs, in the apartment of the Grand Duchess Varvara, the pompadour bed was empty. The doors were all bolted on the inside, with the exception of the glazed casement leading out to the stone balcony and flying staircase

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without; this latter, curiously enough, was fast locked from the outside. In one corner of the boudoir, beside a suit-case of cheap and shabby canvas, Vassily lay curled as a proud and sleepless guardian. The suit-case was, however, empty of a certain humble uniform which for the past month had been packed away, and which might quite reasonably have expected never to be called into service again. The black alpaca gown was, in fact, at this moment doing duty on the piazza outside the pool-room window. Beneath the starched ruffles of the white bib-apron, labored a heart torn between two violently conflicting necessities; and from under the crisp white trifle of the muslin cap, two wide-open blue eyes followed with straining watchfulness every movement of hand or eye in the jovial, smoke-filled room within.

The gentlemen were absorbed in their game, in their stories, in absorbing the contents of the buffet. The window, cut low to the floor, was casemented after the French fashion, and therefore blocked with no wire mosquito-bar. Before the window stood a little Turkish divan. Over the high-cushioned back of the divan, John Borridaile, warmed with the eager pursuit of his game, had a moment before flung his coat.

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The girl without stood breathing unsteadily, like one exhausted with running. To-night, as she knew, she had come face to face with the necessity of action, under penalty of a price which her perplexed sense of honor as well as her tormented heart forbade her to pay. Until this moment what programme of action had framed itself in her whirling brain she hardly knew, hardly dared to think. But now—was it Providence she had to thank, or those powers of evil which are said to make smooth the path of the unwilling sinner?

The wearer of that coat had, as she knew, come straight from the evening session of the Commission to the dinner-table—he, the repositor and recorder of all its secrets, which were the secrets of the two great nations party to the compact. Folded in the pockets of that innocent black garment, who could tell were what revealing papers, what world-swaying documents? She had but to watch her opportunity, when the careless heads in the room within were circled attentively around some spectacularly skilful play, and then so gently, ever so gently, put out her hand and draw it toward her.

Then—she would be free. Free from her intolerable servitude to the sleek, heavy-eyed

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gentleman who even then before her eyes was delighting the roomful with his superb handling of the cue. She would be free of her intolerable dread of bringing disgrace upon Mrs. Rumbold, free to enjoy the two weeks of ineffable and immeasurable bliss that yet remained to her; relieved above all of the haunting horror that in disappearing she would leave behind her, not the exquisite phantasm of an unattainable dream, but the vulgar scandal of an ordinary cheat and impostor.

But she would be a thief.

The glittering room behind the black, waving casement swayed and rocked before her. There was a sensation of nausea in her throat, of cold moisture upon her limbs, of a black, unanswerable bewilderment in her brain. One thing only she saw clearly; whatever way she chose, she would be choosing the path of evil, of irreparable injury to some other human soul beside herself. Here was the penalty of that false situation which, in girlish glee and unthinking exultation in her own dazzling good-fortune, she had accepted at the hands of Mrs. Rumbold. And now, since evil she must do, why not choose that which would at least result in no immediate and inevitable catastrophe to the victim? For,

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after all, it might be years before the Russian government would betray the fact that it held this information; and even then it would not be she herself, it would not be Prince Debreczin, who would betray the name of John Borridaile as one concerned in the business. After all, why should she augur any ill consequences for him, either to-day or in the distant future?

She would be a thief, it is true. But would the mere filching of these pieces of paper alter one whit her moral status in this regard? She, already the thief of honor, the thief of love—was it not laughable that she should shrink from this last and least of disgraces?

And at least it was on her soul alone that this transaction would leave the trail of its sin. Thank heaven she had found it impossible to follow the track laid down for her by Prince Debreczin—thank heaven she had found it impossible to take advantage of Jack's passionate devotion for her, to make him the accomplice of her crime! This afternoon on the veranda of his bungalow, when she had read in his eyes the love that placed his strength, his talents, his life itself at the mercy of her word—thank the dear God she had had the strength to push the dreadful opportunity from

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her! Hideous as was the burden of treachery which she was about to take on her soul, there was at least this consolation: upon her head, and hers alone, would be the certain guilt and the possible penalty.

The room within was suddenly very still. The Hungarian, with a delicate flourish of his cue, had bent over the farther table. Before her eyes were ringed a throng of tensely attentive backs. Through the open casement her hand crawled like a soft white snake. For the moment it seemed to her she had no emotion, no life, no blood.

“Bravo!” came a hoarse, jovial voice from the table—the senator’s voice. “Good for you! Now the red ball, Prince!”

Again the room was silent. Still her hand crawled on. It touched the soft, tingling folds of cloth—grasped them—began its journey back again. The buttons scraped lightly against the edge of the casement—behind her rigid lips the gullet rose stranglingly. There was an outburst of applause from the table. “You’re all right, Prince!” “Where’s Jerome Keough now?” “When you want to tour the country, Prince, I’d like the chance to manage you!” The coat, like the black shadow of a swaying candle-

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flame, had slipped from the divan, through the casement—had lost itself in the thick blackness of the night without.

Inside the room the Hungarian, as though playing directly into the hands of his tool and accomplice, continued his game, swift, daring, and spectacular. Outside, in the darkness of the piazza, his cause was progressing with no less brilliance. With shrinking, resolute hands the girl fumbled rapidly through the many pockets of the coat. Handkerchief, pocket-book, cigarette-case, two coroneted envelopes whereon, with a pang of guilty delight, she saw her own careless handwriting; a half-dozen newspaper cuttings—stay, what was this?

Between her hands she held a long white envelope. The seal was of red wax, large and official looking. Turning it over she beheld in the upper right-hand corner the words “Official Business,” from whence her scared glance flew to the superscription, unmistakable in Jack’s clear black handwriting:

For the Honorable
The Secretary of State,
Washington, D. C.

Her hands quivered, her heart leaped in a spasm which seemed the very sickness of tri-

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umph. The official report of the proceedings of the Commission, which the secretary had obviously brought with him to wait a better opportunity for mailing—the very information for which her tormentor had conditioned, here she held it in her hand!

Behind the lace-covered casement, she could hear the prince making his adieux and acknowledgments to his host, amid the chorused remonstrances of his friends and admirers. In a few moments now he would be there at the secret meeting-place—very well, she was not afraid to meet him! With stealthy touch she replaced the coat between the window and the divan, just as it might have fallen when flung down by the wearer. For one moment her sharpened glance, darting between the waving lace curtains of the casement, fell as it seemed directly into the eyes of Borridaile. He was standing at the other side of the nearest pool-table, his hands raised to light a cigarette, his careless glance filled with laughter at the pleasantries of the little Japanese at his elbow. Never before as in this moment when she herself crouched invisible before him, divided from him by one link more added to the chain of treachery which bound her, had he appeared

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to her so upright, so filled with a vivid and kindly life, so completely the incarnation of all that woman desires in man. Suddenly his figure melted and swam in a blur of blinding tears. Clamping her teeth over her lower lip in a hard bite, the girl sprang silently to her feet. With noiseless steps she made her way down the stone staircase, down the garden-path, to the tangled rose-garden above the terrace and pergola.

Here, as she knew, it was safe to wait. On this night of festivity, the servants were all on duty in the house; and even if one caught a glimpse of a little maid in cap and apron wandering through the grounds, what then? And for the first time she blessed Mrs. Rumbold for her passion for things European, in excluding from her grounds the crudely revealing radiance of electric light.

She had sat there perhaps a half-hour, sheltered behind a dew-wet and fragrant rose-tree, looking out over the dim, liquid expanse before her, when suddenly she started—strained her ears. Yes, it was unmistakable—faintly, rhythmically, every moment nearer, the dip of a paddle came up to her through the windless darkness of the night. He was coming, the

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master to whom, like Faust, she was selling body and soul in return for an ephemeral and sordid boon. Well, it was too late now to draw back. Let him come, she was ready! With convulsive finger-tips she pressed the precious document, folded in one corner of her apron; and so she stood motionless, listening—listening—listening—

Then, faintly, a splashing paddle echoed hollowly within the walls of the artificial harbor below—soft footsteps sounded upon the marble stairs. The moment had come. With flying feet the girl fled down the half-seen steps that led to the terrace below. She paused for a moment, straining her eyes through the shadows. Swift as her movements had been, it was plain that her enemy's eagerness had led his steps in advance of hers. With faltering steps she entered the pergola.

Beneath the vine-covered trellis it was very dark—not so dark, however, but that she could distinguish the tall, black-clad figure which stood out against the dusk of the leafy wall. Horror of the thing she had to do pervaded her like a deadly, environing essence—horror of the man who had driven her to this shame as

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to a shambles, horror of his presence, his touch, his very voice.

Thrusting the document into his willing hands—"Here, take it!" she whipped the words at him like a lash. Then, with recoil quick as from a serpent, she turned back to the starlit space of the doorway. The air without smelled fresh and sweet to her nostrils. And she—what right had she to be breathing it at all?

The sustaining fire of necessary action once removed, quick and terrible was the fall of her soul to the ashes of reaction. By a brave and skilful piece of audacity, she had bought a moment's safety for herself and for Mrs. Rumbold; but who could tell what future calamity she had unloosed for her own soul, for the country she loved, for the man who was a thousand times dearer to her than both together? For a moment the wild impulse flamed up within her to turn back, to beg from her enemy the restitution of the stolen letter, to offer him—a helpless laugh fluttered up in her throat. To demand of the wolf the lamb already rent and half swallowed—that were the more reasonable quest!

On the marble steps below her sounded the flying tread of feet. Turning, she found herself

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again face to face with the tall figure in its long, black coat.

“Is that you, madame? Have you brought anything for me?”

She stood silent, motionless, staring through the starlit darkness. Had Debreczin gone suddenly mad?

XIV.

HE laughed, a little jangling, guarded peal at her own terror. What had seemed bewildering was after all, at second glance, contemptibly simple.

“Monsieur,” she whispered hurriedly, “I had not thought you so dull as not to understand. That letter I handed you just now—did you fancy it was a mere billet-doux? Must I explain, it was the official report of the Commission, which I stole just now—that is the word, *stole*—from the coat pocket of the secretary.”

The prince bent toward her. “Are you dreaming?” he asked harshly.

“I? Oh, no!” she answered with a sigh. “Look at the letter, monsieur—you will see that I speak the truth!”

“What letter?” he repeated with furious impatience. “You have given me no letter!”

“Do you deny,” she asked with sudden horror, “the letter you took from my hand, just now, in the pergola?”

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He laughed sardonically. "You are clever, madame—but, I repeat, I must deny your story absolutely!"

She caught at her breath, while in her soul bewilderment congealed itself to the cold concreteness of formulated terror. This over-subtle opponent of hers—it was plain now for what purpose he had retreated through the darkness of the pergola, doubled the path below, and reascended the marble staircase in renewed pursuit of his victim. Her mistake—she understood now what careless folly, what mere vanity, her mistake had been—to yield up the precious document without verification, without spoken acknowledgment in return, that was bad enough! —but the original, the fatal, mistake lay deeper. To think that by one piece of nefarious service she could buy her freedom from the unscrupulous man who held such power over her—to believe that by straining her abilities to their perpetual utmost, by steeping her soul in crime at his command, she could ever hope to win her quittance from a master such as this! She understood now—she had betrayed all that she held most dear, and for nothing. She had paid the price, but had failed to grasp the recompense.

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The Hungarian's cold voice broke in on her whirling thoughts. "Let us talk business, madame," he said decidedly. "I am no child, you understand, to be caught with a cock-and-bull excuse such as this. You thought, perhaps, you could buy your own immunity and spare your lover by one and the same clever stroke, at the expense of poor Debreczin's stupidity—ah, no, madame! If you must tell me lies, I beg you to flatter my intelligence with more subtle lies than this. Come! You say you succeeded in laying hands on one of the official reports of the Commission?"

She nodded wearily. "To my shame—yes!"

He took a step toward her—she could see his eyes glisten in the darkness. "I begin to understand. It is highly possible you have the letter—but, having done so much, your heart fails at the last, the decided step. Come—if you really have possession of it, then hand it over!"

She stepped back. "As I have told you," she replied unsteadily, "it is no longer in my possession."

"If I could be sure of that!" his voice was in her ear. Again she stepped back from his unpleasant nearness, but this time she found herself held by a vise-like constriction on her

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arm. "I am weary of your trifling, madame. You swear to me you laid hands on the necessary document. You refuse to yield it to me—very well, it becomes my plain duty to find if you speak the truth!"

Again she recoiled from him, struggling helplessly like a wild bird against the detaining springe. "What do you mean?" she asked in a choked whisper.

"I shall search you, madame!"

She drew herself up rigidly against his hand. "You dare not!" she protested vehemently—"with the city all around us, with a whoie houseful ready to rouse itself if I call for help. No, monsieur, I am not afraid!"

"That is fortunate," he retorted with irony. "I should think, you see, that you would be afraid of the spectacle thus presented to Newport and the world—the Grand Duchess Varvara, in the masquerade of a parlor-maid, keeping a midnight rendezvous with Debreczin, the celebrated eater of hearts. My poor friend Jack! I can see his face as he hears—"

He felt her quiver and droop upon his arm. "Scream!" he said agreeably; "*scream, ma belle, scream!*"

"But you have the letter—you have it

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already!" her feeble protest reiterated itself, then broke off in a strangling gasp of horror. His hand was on her shoulder, his desecrating touch fumbled, searched. Desperately she resisted, while from her rigid lips the helpless agony of flesh and spirit broke in a breathless, half-voiced cry.

Soft and inarticulate as was her protest, it was not without its effect. The nightmare touch which detained her fell, suddenly relaxed; Debreczin's head was suddenly lifted to glare straight before him. The girl, held now only by a hand on one quivering arm, turned to follow the direction of his eyes. There before her, half seen in the leafy shadows of the terrace, stood a figure in that dim light, the reduplication of the one beside her—a tall, lean-shouldered form, wearing a long dark coat. "Was you wantin' help, lady?" asked the figure briskly.

The girl took in her breath in a wave of sudden relief that saw nothing beyond the moment's blessed deliverance. The special watchman lately employed by Mrs. Rumbold, and whom the man at her side had vauntingly promised to have discharged before the meeting of to-night—how could she ever have believed

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that his boasted influence, even with the senator on his side, would weigh heavily enough with Mr. Rumbold to cause him to give over his settled plans?

“So you’re the secret-service man,” she gasped; “thank God you’ve come!”

But the Hungarian’s hold on her arm did not relax. “Then if you’re a policeman, my good man,” he said with swift readiness, “you can give me assistance. Here is no question of vulgar assault—this woman has a valuable letter that she has stolen from me. I call on you to force her to restore it.”

“A letter?”—the man before them repeated the word in accents of sharp inquiry. In sudden comprehension the girl took in her breath. How bewildered she had been, how lost in sickened horror at the physical violence offered her, not to have understood at once!”

“Then it was to you,” she asked swiftly, “that I handed the letter just now in the pergola?”

The man nodded, with a reluctance visible in the darkness. “Yes’m. Jest to me. Though, I’ll own, I did n’t rightly understand.”

Suddenly the detaining touch on her arm relaxed and fell. The Hungarian, laughing

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delightedly in the darkness, was bowing before her with all his old-time suavity. "Madame! A thousand pardons! Your mistake was, after all, a perfectly natural one—who could have suspected a watchman? Here, my man, I'll take the letter."

The girl raised her hand. "No, wait one moment—wait!"

For, struggling to a sudden, overwhelming life within her, she was conscious of the impulse which, a few moments ago as she had turned from the pergola, had moved her soul to sudden qualms of doubt. And this new-born thing, this suddenly illuminated power of perception, this steadfast defiance of all ill consequences save the stain of evil consciously incurred, she knew for herself, her very self. There on the dim, rustling hillside beneath the stars, between a stranger openly hostile and a stranger unknown, weighed down by a burden of remorse and fear and hopeless, tender longings, her distracted, untaught soul came for the first time to itself. This piece of hideous treachery that she had planned—why, it was impossible. Thank God for the power of choice which still was hers!

"No," she said quietly, "I have changed my mind. I can't let you have the letter, after all,"

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“Indeed,” replied the prince, with a breath that whistled curiously between his teeth, “and what do you propose to do with it?”

“It goes back to its owner,” she replied with intrepidity, “to-morrow.”

Debreczin turned from her to the waiting policeman. “Here,” he said, “give me the letter, my man. Here’s a dollar for your pains.”

But the shadowy form drew back. “Shall I give it to him, lady?” he asked doubtfully.

“No!” she cried beneath her breath.

The prince laughed. “This becomes absurd,” he said coolly. “I see I must inform you of my identity. I am one of Mrs. Borridaile’s visitors, the Prince Debreczin.”

With a tone quickened to a curiously vivid interest, the watchman interrupted him. “A prince did you say, sir?”

“A prince,” retorted the Hungarian, “of the Dual Empire. Now you know who I am, will you give me my property?”

The man drew back with a gesture expressive even in the dim starlight. “If you think I’m one to favor princes!” he returned with brief contempt.

For an instant the Hungarian stood silent; then, advancing in sudden desperation, “I’ll

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have that letter," he hissed with a curious roughness of accent which showed how strongly he was excited. "I'm going to have that letter, if I have to wring both your necks to get it!"

For an instant the girl's flesh stirred in terror—would his ruthless determination lead him, after all, to fling all prudence to the winds? The power of those long, sinewy hands of his she knew only too well. Suddenly her breath came back to her, in a little fluttering laugh of pure joy. The stranger's arm was lifted; in his outstretched hand, levelled with the prince's head, was a small object that glittered wanly in the starlight.

"Prince or no prince," said the man in a voice that seemed to clamp itself over the other's will like a vise, "lay a finger on me or on the young lady, and this is what you git. It's death, no less. Do you understand?"

Debreczin, drawing himself haughtily to his angular height, stood immovable. "Put up your pistol, man," he said with dignity. "I am not one, you understand, to be frightened by mere threats of death; though I recognize, I own, the superior force of the argument you present. For one of my rank, as you know, the disgrace of the public fracas which you threaten

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would be infinitely worse than death. So, as the situation has plainly reached the point of impossibility, I see no reason for continuing it longer. Madame, I have the honor to bid you good-night!"

The girl stared at him. Was he thus easily abandoning the field? With what purpose did he go—with what plans of retaliatory vengeance?

"You understand," he said swiftly, "the conditions remain unchanged. There are still thirty-six hours left. I think, in view of the consequences entailed by your continual obstinacy, I can afford to abandon the present field of dispute. Tell your mistress from me, I will give her as I said till noon on Saturday. Twelve o'clock on Saturday, do you understand? And if, by then—"

His voice broke off in a sudden, inarticulate snarl more horrifying than any spoken words. Then, recovering himself:

"Au revoir, ma belle!" his tone was jaunty with a cynical assurance which showed how secure was his confidence in her ultimate surrender. Then, doffing his hat with a sardonic salute, he turned and ran lightly down the marble steps toward the dark, murmuring waters below them.

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From the tall figure of the stranger, motionless in the darkness before her, the girl turned with a little weary sigh. Until this moment she had not realized how completely the terrible strain of the night had drained her of nervous and muscular force. And her very voice drooped limply as she said:

“And now will you give me my letter? Thank you very, very much. It’s impossible that you could ever know how much you have done for me to-night.”

“Wait a moment,” said the stranger’s voice, with an odd eagerness. “I beg pardon, ma’am, if I’m wrong, but ain’t it—ain’t it Angie Hooper?”

The girl recoiled like a detected thief. Her first and strongest impulse was to turn in flight. Then as the familiar accent, the old familiar name, touched warmly upon chords of her soul long disused, she was drawn back as by a homing instinct deeper and more powerful than the springs of her terror. For a moment her eyes strained through the thick shadows; then, with suddenly kindled recollection:

“Elmer Morrow!” she cried softly.

XV.

THE man laughed—a laugh of joy so acute that its unbearable ecstasy ended in a sob. “I thought ‘t was you,” he said brokenly, “but I was n’t goin’ to give you away before *him*. Good Lord, Angie, have I ever stopped thinkin’ of you sence I left East Bayville? Tell me—how are you, little girl?”

“I’m well,” she answered softly, “and you, Elmer? I’m glad to see you have such a good place, and doing so well in it!”

“Wait one moment,” said the man harshly, “fore you let yourself speak with me one moment further; I want you to understand out an’ out how I stand—I can’t lie to you, Angie! You think I stand here fer the law? Well, I don’t. I stand here agin it!”

For an instant the girl stared, horror-smitten. Then the remembrance of her own deed of an hour ago came back to her, quick and stinging. Who was she, to recoil from this poor playmate of her childhood, however low he had fallen?

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“You ’re not—a burglar, Elmer ?” she asked in pitiful accents.

“A burglar!” the harsh New England voice tossed the word back to her in the same scornful tones as those in which they had repudiated the Hungarian’s assertion of his title. “So you think I ’d go agin the laws fer my own greed and gain ? No, it ’s the laws themselves I ’m after—the laws and the tyrants that ride atop of ’em ! Do you know what this is, Angie ?”

He held out to her the little shining instrument with which, a few moments before, he had compelled the submission of her tormentor. In a curiously shrinking terror, she bent over it. It was no revolver, as she had thought, but a black body the size and shape of a thick candle, curiously bound over and over with myriad twists of shining white wire.

“Let me look at it—quick, I must be going !” she said hurriedly. The man drew back his hand.

“ ’T ain’t safe fer little girls to handle,” he said with a ghastly attempt at jocularity; “it ’s—it ’s dynamite.”

“Dynamite !” From the horror of that word, as from the living presence of death, the girl recoiled in a purely instinctive panic which

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for one fearful instant made all perils of the soul seem light. Then, controlling herself to face the import of that word, her quick thought travelled back across Mrs. Rumbold's terrors and precautions of the last few days, to the senator's mention of Elmer's very name this afternoon.

“Then you 're—an Anarchist, Elmer?” she asked gently.

“An Anarchist—why not?” he retorted vehemently. “If you could see the life I 've led sence I come up to N' York—I 've ben swindled, I 've ben starvin', I 've ben in jail fer takin' food I had to have or starve. Then, comin' out o' jail, what chance was there fer me—an ex-convict? Do you know what it means fer a man to have that name tagged on to him, Angie? So when I fell in with a Russian chap that started to tell me what was wrong with the world, an' the way to mend it, do you think it 's queer I listened to him? Fer he told me *right*. So I jined in with him. Though, I 'll own, I ain't done much to date. Last year when I tried, my bomb went wild. But this time, ef it 's the last time I lift my hand on earth, I ain't a-goin' to miss!”

The girl stood listening in restless hesitation.

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Twelve o'clock as she knew had sounded—by one o'clock Mrs. Rumbold might be home from the dance. She might be missed—even ascending by the outside staircase of carved stone that led from the rose-garden to her boudoir window, she might find awkward encounter. Nevertheless there was in Morrow's last words a grim and foreboding wildness that held her motionless to the spot.

"Elmer," she whispered, "what do you mean? Not"—the sudden thought that came to her chilled her lips beyond the power of speech.

His eyes scorched hers through the darkness. "You 'll not give me away, Angie, *that* I know. You know fer yourself, there's nothin' I can refuse you, even ef I never ben more than dirt under your little feet to you. But ef you ask me to put the noose round my neck and give you the rope's end to hold, then it 's done—done cheerful. Yes, I 'm down here on business, I 'll own, sence you ask me, Angie!"—he lowered his voice to a whisper that cut her ear like a needle—"I 'm after—I 'm after that Russian princess that 's stayin' here in the house!"

"Oh!" Beyond the monosyllable she could

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make no immediate reply. Her chief conscious fear was that the rising faintness which numbed her limbs should likewise take from her the power of action in this swift and terrible crisis. She gripped her hands and breathed hard. Should she reveal to the man before her the secret which should preserve her in assured safety from the shocking danger which loomed violent and hideous before her? The secret which, after all, unless by some miracle, would within a brief and measured space of time be blazed by the Hungarian before the eyes of a grinning world? And yet, the miracle!—to the chances of that miracle her soul clung, when faced with the alternative of entrusting her momentous secret to the keeping of the poor crack-brain before her. Swiftly her distraught soul gathered its forces together, to grapple with this flying and desperate necessity.

“Elmer,” she said, “you told me just now there was nothing you would n’t do for me?”

He raised his hand in solemn affirmation. From the brightly lighted house on the hillside above, the gay notes of a piano came down to them through the whispering darkness. She could see the wire-wrapped dynamite glisten whitely in his hand.

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“Fore the Lord,” he said earnestly, “I spoke no more ’n the truth. Sence the old days when I kerried your books to school, Angie—anything ’s done, that you have a mind to ask of me!”

She leaned toward him with swift intensity. “Then, Elmer, don’t do this terrible thing. For my sake, spare the Princess Varvara!”

“What?” he cried in harsh amazement. “You, Angie, takin’ the side of the oppressors of the poor? What’s the princess to you, that you should take her part? What have you to do with her, I say?” Then as his eye, piercing the darkness, took in for the first time the details of the black-and-white uniform she wore, he spoke with dawning comprehension, “Ah! you’re here in the same house with her. You’re one of the hired help, Angie, I reckon?”

She nodded, in a sudden perception of the grotesque truth of his words. He went on swiftly:

“You’re maid to the princess herself then, perhaps, Angie?”

“I am much with the princess—yes,” she answered tremulously.

“Fond of her?” he asked roughly.

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She hesitated—scorn of her own feeble nature, hatred of her own flagrant misdoings, made any affirmative answer to that question an impossible mockery which, even for the sake of the vital point to be gained, ran beyond her powers. So—

“I am sorry for her,” she replied in a low voice.

Morrow’s sardonic disbelief broke from him in a hoarse but guarded spasm of laughter.

“Sorry fer her!” he sneered. “That’s a good one, Angie! When was she ever sorry for one of the poor wretches that she an’ her kin have ground into the dust for centuries? And what call have we to feel sorry fer her, set up high and mighty in her grandeur an’ happiness above us? But jest the same—”

“Wait a moment, Elmer!” The girl snatched at the flying opportunity revealed by his words. “Listen, Elmer! So it’s for her privileges you hate her, for the happiness you think she enjoys above you and me?”

He nodded. “But I know a way to even things up!” And with the glittering object in his hand he gesticulated murderously. The girl shrank away.

“Be careful with that fearful stuff, Elmer,

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please!" His arms sank obediently to his sides. She went on feverishly:

"But, Elmer, if I could assure you with absolute knowledge, on absolute faith, that the woman whom you are intending to kill is of all women in the world the most miserable! That beneath the splendor for which you hate her lies nothing but hatred for herself, remorse for the past, and terror for the future; that with the whole force of her unhappy heart she loves a man to whom she can be nothing more than the common dust under his feet; that she lies body and soul at the mercy of an unscrupulous tyrant who is planning to destroy her more slowly but no less cruelly than you—oh, Elmer, don't you think that you at least might hold back your hand and have mercy?"

He seemed unexpectedly struck by her words. "So the pore girl's in love," he said with a deep sigh; "well, I can feel fer her there—pore thing, pore thing!"

"You 'll spare her, Elmer, you and your friends?" she asked, with a throb of hope.

Still he hesitated. "You say," he asked slowly, "that some one else is after her, meanin' mischief?"

She nodded painfully. "Mischief," she

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replied, "far worse than the death that you hold over her."

He tenderly fingered the dynamite in his hand. "That's queer," he replied simply. "What can it be, I wonder, an' who can it be—worse 'n *this*?" Again he considered; then, with the quickness of a sudden thought—"That chap that you was havin' the row with jest now," he asked swiftly. "I ain't had a chance yet to speak of him—fact is, he was clean knocked out o' my head by the sight o' you, Angie, an' the sound o' your voice sayin' *Elmer* agin—but—what was that message he gin you fer your mistress? Angie, is he her enemy that you are speakin' of?"

She nodded sorrowfully. "And you saw the kind of man he is—don't you think you can safely leave her to him?"

"To him!" he repeated her words savagely, "and him a prince, one of the destroyers of mankind. Yes, you're right, Angie—we'll leave the whole devil's brood to devour each other, like a nest o' scorpions. You're—sure he'll do it, Angie?"

"As sure," she replied, "as I am of nothing else on earth!"

He was quick to detect the note of anguish

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in her voice. "And what's that to you, Angie?" he asked with contempt. "It's not you the cuss is goin' to hurt, is it? If it were—"

"No, no indeed!" She dispelled any doubt which might lead to Elmer's detection of her secret. "No one is going to hurt me, Elmer, thank you very much just the same. And now I must say good-night—it grows frightfully late. Thank you for what you have done for me—for promising not to harm my princess, for saving me from that ruffian just now, for saving my letter—ah, my letter!"

"Here it is." He produced it from his pocket and held it out to her. In a whirl of suddenly born perplexities, she surveyed the pale, half-seen symbol of her temptation, of her fall, of her tardy regeneration.

How to convey it back to its rightful owner? How to send it to the post, or to Borridaile Court, without admitting some one fatally into the confidence of the Grand Duchess Varvara? And to return it to the owner with her own hand— Suddenly her troubled eye fell on the mute, humbly waiting figure before her.

After all, whom could she better trust than this old friend of her childhood, this faithful, slavish adorer who, half-crazed though he might

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be, carried unchanged his devotion to her as the one unswerving idea of his unsteady soul? And after all, beside him, what choice had she? "Elmer," she said quickly, "will you do something for me?"

"If you 'll let me," he replied with the hungry fervor of a fanatic to his patron saint, "I 'll die for you!"

"My poor old Elmer," she sighed pitifully—"but it 's nothing like that I want from you; it 's something that may, possibly, turn out to your own advantage. Will you deliver this letter for me, please?"

"To the Hungarian prince?" he said sharply.

"No; no, indeed! To the gentleman who wrote it, and to whom it belongs, Mr. John Borridaile"—her tongue faltered tinglingly upon the syllables, with a betraying softness which she suddenly feared might reveal her weakness to the man before her. But he, intent on the details of her request, noticed nothing. "Mr. John Borridaile," she repeated bravely, "at Borridaile Court, near Ochre Point—the house is well known, you will have no trouble finding it. I want you to speak with him personally. I want you to deliver the letter into his own hand and no one else's. You understand?"

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“I understand,” he replied steadily; “and what do I tell him?”

“You tell him—ah!” she hesitated for a moment. “Tell him you were acquainted with one of the servants at Stormcliff; and passing down the road last night you spied this letter under the *porte cochère*. You showed it to one of the servants, who said that Mr. Borridaile, as secretary of the Commission, would be the person most probably in correspondence with the secretary of state. And so—Elmer, you will do this for me?”

“You know from the old days, Angie, whether you can trust me!” The pathos of his tone drew her thoughts suddenly from her own sad perplexities to his.

“My poor old friend, how selfish I have been toward you! I must go now. But first—listen! I can’t bear to think of you in this terrible way of life. Elmer, if you won’t be offended—I have some money saved—”

“What do you take me fer!” She started back in fear from the withering indignation of his tone. Then, recovering himself, he went on with a sudden weary droop in his voice. “You know how much life has ben wuth to me, Angie dear, sence that day four year ago when

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you said *no* to me. I have my Cause, of course, that's somethin'. But I sometimes think ef I could jest do somethin' fer you, somethin' that would make you happy as I can't, an' die doin' it— But that's plumb foolishness! I must n't hender you here longer, an' mebbe git you a scoldin' from your boss. Your letter 'll go to your Mr. Borridaile, fust thing in the mornin', never fear. An' now—good-bye, Angie!"

"My poor Elmer!" she gave him her hand. "But you have n't told me yet what I can do for you, how I—"

"Nothin'!" he interrupted her sternly. "I ain't a man fer a respectable workin' girl to be seen with—an ex-jailbird, do you hear? But you 've stopped an' talked to me fer once—you 've given me the sweetness of your voice to remember, an' that's more 'n I could have asked. I ain't got the right to stay no longer—good-bye again, an' God bless you, Angie!"

As suddenly as he had come, his tall dark form melted into the blackness of the pergola. The girl, left alone upon the terrace, stood for a moment motionless in the fragrant living mystery of the night.

But that other night two weeks ago!—when, for the first time, her poor, stunted, feeble little

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soul had wakened to life before the magical words and presence of love! In that new, transfiguring brilliance, the path of life had stretched almost plain before her—but now, to what ruin this maze was to lead her in the end, who could tell?

But the weariness of her body quieted even the trouble of her mind. With her feet stumbling under her, almost without care whether she were discovered or not, she made her way to the deserted gardens and the darkened outer stairway that led to the locked door of her room.

Vassily, whimpering softly, welcomed her return.

XVI.

TWENTY-SIX hours!

This was the first thought that came to the mind of the girl who woke in the great pompadour bed, as her feverish glance fell upon the little gilt clock ticking upon the chimney-piece. She was free, it was true, from the intolerable inner stain which for one infamous moment she had planned—but in twenty-six hours she must face open disgrace, open ruin.

Twenty-six hours! Why, indeed, drag out this hideous suspense for that allotted time, like a condemned criminal awaiting the hour of his execution? She had saved the man whom she loved from the danger which threatened him at her own hands; she had by sacrificing her unspotted image in his heart saved at once his honor and her own. But he would never know it; he would never know that in thus damning herself before the world she had in reality saved herself from the greater condemnation—that in falling, as it seemed, beneath his contempt

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she had in reality risen to the poor best of her feeble, passionate soul. But she knew it. In the sordid, empty years which stretched like a grim interminable pathway before her, that knowledge would be all the light and comfort she would have—she had best make the most of it. But Jack would never know.

And to-day, to look into his honest, kindly eyes bent in adoration on her, and to figure to herself the bitter contempt which would flash from them to-morrow evening as they dwelt upon the headlines which the Hungarian had pictured to her yesterday—no, it was more, in the enfeebled nervous state produced by last night's strain, than she could bear. Twenty-six hours! Why, indeed, should this farce last more than one hour more?

To Mrs. Rumbold accordingly she went. That lady, propped up on innumerable little pink silk cushions, finishing her chocolate and her correspondence together, looked up with a smile of careless triumph as her guest entered her room. Her morning's mail contained so much that was flattering, so much that was delightful!—and all owing to the daringly played stroke symbolized to her by the drooping, heavy-eyed beauty who, wrapped in fluttering

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pale-blue draperies, came trailing softly into her room.

But the maid dismissed, the doors examined and then carefully locked—ah, then! Mrs. Rumbold, sitting bolt upright among her rosy pillows, listened to a flat, unvarnished tale of failure that drove the blood from her little sharp face and brought her white teeth glistening between her whiter lips.

She had not climbed to her present position of eminence, however, without the aid of a practical nature which made her even in this desperate moment perceive the futility of wasting time in reproaches and in lamentations. Therefore it was not in open words but in her tone, as thin and cold as the glance of her blade-blue eyes, that she made manifest her rage and contempt for the self-confessed bungler before her.

To give up the game, to slip out of sight now, with a whole day left in which to combat the schemes of this wretched Hungarian? Never! What was the girl thinking of? Because she had failed ignominiously, must she now turn coward? Because she had made a botch of the whole affair, did that mean that Mrs. Rumbold, taking it into her capable hands, could not conduct it to success? Bah! What

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the man wanted was money, of course—to-night, at Mrs. Borridaile's dinner or the Eustis's baccarat-party, she would take the opportunity of interviewing him, and hearing his price.

The girl, remembering Debreczin's haughty disclaimer of moneyseeking, on the occasion of their first interview together, relapsed into miserable doubt from the hope momentarily induced by Mrs. Rumbold's confident words. "But if," she said painfully, "he refuses to treat on such a basis—if he will not accept money as the price of his silence—"

Mrs. Rumbold tossed her head. "Don't talk like an idiot," she said sharply. "Of course this person has his cash price—like you yourself! Though I regret to tell you, young lady, that *your* check will be very considerably diminished by this enormous outlay which you might have saved, and did n't. No, don't argue the matter!" She raised her voice peevishly as the girl, flushing hotly, opened her mouth to protest. "My nerves have really had all they can stand for one day—and if I 'm to clear up the mess you 've made of things, I think I shall need them in their best condition for to-night. You may go now!" She turned abruptly—and as the girl, as white as she had

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been red before, rose obediently to her feet, a faint grin wrinkled the thin lips of the lady sinking back upon her pillows. "If you ask me," she said, "who the joke is on, I should say there's not a bad one on Mrs. Borridaile, if she only knew! A professional blackmailer as a guest—hm! Not so much better than a professional humbug, is it, my dear?"

This taunt passed, however, high like summer thunder over the suffering soul before her. To finish out the allotted span of service demanded of her, to play her part with spirit before the piercing, trustful eyes of the man she loved—here was task enough for her strength, without wasting any force in idle indignation.

It was in the evening, indeed, when at his aunt's house she should see Jack for the last time, that her trial was to come. The day passed slowly, hour by hour. The routine of their usual life claimed them—a luncheon party, bridge, a motor-ride. Twenty hours before the clock stroke which should settle her fate, and cover her with infamy in the eyes of the man she loved! Never to see him again, that was hard enough, but it was all within the conditions of the game. But to think of him knowing her for the cheat she was! Eighteen hours. No,

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it was impossible that Mrs. Rumbold should be able to compound with the implacable Shylock who had seen his own terms rejected. After all, there was a ray of comfort for the girl. She *had* rejected those infamous terms! She had undone, at all risk to herself, the harm she had plotted against Jack. It was all confusion, all misery, but at least she had not done as much evil as she might have done. Fourteen hours!

It was eight o'clock when she sat down at the dinner-table at Mrs. Borridaile's, face to face with the eyes which had pierced, now smiling, now reproachful, through all her day's waking dream. And for that very reason, perhaps, the eyes themselves, and the familiar voice thrilling in her ear—like the flower-wreathed table before her and the gay, gorgeous company—seemed to her no more than figments of an exquisite, evanescent dream from which, so soon and so roughly, she must be awakened.

Her awakening, however, which though not final was sufficiently complete, came to her even before the allotted time. It was in the drawing-room after dinner, while the party were sipping their liqueurs and waiting for the

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automobiles which should convey them to the baccarat party which was to follow, that Debreczin, smiling agreeably, crossed the room to join his young host and the lady who was known to the assembled company as the Grand Duchess Varvara.

She greeted his coming with a gay and resolute smile. A few commonplaces of conversation followed. Then, as though the effort were too great, the girl turned away her eyes listlessly toward the other end of the room where Mrs. Marsten, seated at the piano, trilled little French songs with spirit and grace. Two short sentences exchanged by the two men behind her struck suddenly upon her ears:

“Any news of the missing document, my brave?”

“No.”

Borridaile’s tone, as he uttered his monosyllabic reply, was unfamiliar, like the voice of a stranger—grim, cold, touched with a profound but resolute despair. She clenched her hands and bit her cheeks from the inside to keep from fainting, as Debreczin’s swift undertone went on:

“But go, telephone again to the chief of police, my friend!”

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The hostess, stopping in her dignified progress across the room, addressed her nephew suddenly:

“My dear Jack, what can be detaining them at the garage? It grows late, and we promised to begin play promptly at eleven o’clock. Will you have the goodness, my dear boy, to see what delays the automobiles?”

With a bow and a brief apology, Jack was gone. His aunt stood lamenting, with affectionate solicitude, his suddenly changed looks and the anxious preoccupation which she had noticed in him to-day. “They work him like a galley-slave on that Commission, upon my word. Last night he was not in his bed. All to-day—” Suddenly her eye was caught by something ghastly in the beautiful white face before her; and throwing out her plump, soft hand, she saved the girl from falling.

“Princess!” she cried with real anxiety, “you are going to faint! Here, my dear child—Prince, ask Willis to bring a glass of water!”

Mrs. Rumbold, amiably concerned, hustled up with vinaigrette and good advice. “These heart attacks—my poor darling! You are better now?”

The girl opened her blue eyes with a little

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resolute smile. "Thank you all, so much! But I am quite well now, a passing twinge—the evening is so warm!"

Mrs. Borridaile, relieved of her sudden anxiety, readily accepted the excuse. "Certainly, the heat of the room; these rooms are on the leeward side—here we are miserably close! My dear child, I advise you to allow Prince Debreczin to take you to the air!"

The girl rose unsteadily. "Yes," she responded fervently, "if he will be so kind!" And stiffening her muscles so as to profit as little as possible by the willing and detested arm offered for her support, she trailed her shimmering blue draperies slowly across the room, through the glazed doorway, and out on the cool, dark piazza and wide *porte cochère* beyond.

"Now, Princess," said Debreczin, with ironic courtesy, as dropping his arm she turned with swiftly restored forces to face him in the half-lit darkness, "now, Princess, my congratulations, that you came to your senses after all—"

"Tell me!" her choked voice interrupted his drawling words. "What does this mean? Is it possible he never received the letter?"

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“And why should he have received it?”

“You know why!” she returned with energy.

“Because, as I told you, I sent that letter back last night to its rightful owner!”

The prince laughed impatiently. “Madame, I have been in America long enough to understand the game that your nation calls *bluff*! Do you suppose I do not see that in this pretence of having returned the letter to Mr. Borridaile, you are trying to throw me off the track and evade my terms?”

“Monsieur, I have told you the truth!”

“Bah, madame!” he continued; “we have no time to waste. Listen! My chief grows pressing; my information must be in Petersburg by Sunday. *Mon Dieu*, madame! do you think that I enjoy any better than you this business into which we are forced? I assure you it is all excessively painful to me—and by the very fact of my employing means so distasteful you may perceive my desperate necessity.”

“Yes.”

“Come, madame, the letter! Or as noon strikes on Saturday this wretched secret of yours, this thrilling, delicious scandal of your imposture and Mrs. Rumbold’s, is wired to the

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office of every newspaper in New York. The headlines, *ma belle*; have you thought of the headlines? And the pictures! Your friend Monsieur Jack will be able to cut from the journals the picture that he so much desires!"

From beyond the wall of dark cedars below the house came the faint, half-heard screech of an automobile. The sound seemed to recall the prince to a sudden recollection of the moment's needs.

"Here come the machines," he said quickly; "in a moment we shall be off, we must not attract attention by lingering here. We shall have time to speak together later; and I have no doubt, by your keeping the letter for me, that we shall come to excellent terms!"

The girl bowed mechanically. A moment's solitude in which to collect her forces scattered by the recent unlooked-for revelation, and the appalling blow threatened her by the prince's words, seemed to her the utmost she could ask.

"If you would be so kind, monsieur," she said, with a deliberate though tremulous return to her grande-dame manner, "as to bring me my wrap!"

With a smile which grimly recognized the necessity of the comedy thus played between

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them, the prince bowed. "Madame," he answered, "I am, as you know, always at your command!"

In a moment he had gone, and she was left standing alone in the half-lit and flower-scented veranda. Jack had never received the letter! There was the fact to which her brain must learn to adjust itself. Not only had her original misdoing been all for nothing, but her tardy restitution as well. She had stained her soul with the crimes of theft and treachery, but she had not thereby succeeded in buying her immunity from the Hungarian's threats. She had braved ruin and disgrace for herself and for the woman who had befriended her, but she had not thereby delivered the man she loved from the calamity inflicted upon him by her own hand. Jack was ruined, Mrs. Rumbold was ruined, she was ruined; and for the general mess that she had made of things, she had no one to thank but herself.

To trust so urgent, so vital, a commission to a poor wild-witted outlaw like Elmer Morrow! For the carelessness and cowardice which had thus snatched at the first and easiest chance presented her for restoring the letter, she was now properly punished. And yet—poor Elmer,

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the friend of her childhood, her devoted dog and slave! Upon whom in this world, in this hard-hearted bewildering world, could she rely if not on him? He had protested his willingness to lay down his life for her; so why not—

She caught in her breath. His life! A chill thought trickled like melting ice into her feverish, whirling brain. His life! After all, the Hungarian had last night beheld him face to face; she knew her enemy's determination, his readiness to avail himself of all means the most unscrupulous to gain his end. Was it not more reasonable to suppose that his fault rather than Elmer's lay at the bottom of the mystery of the undelivered letter? In that case, by what fraud or secret violence? And where was poor Elmer now?

Her despairing eyes swept the shadowy garden before her; suddenly they remained riveted, focused in horror—on the empty air? Was it solid flesh upon which her straining glance rested, or a visualized projection of her own agonized thoughts, a mysterious and transcendental confirmation of her sudden fears?

For out from the wall of dark cedars slipped a form as dark as they. With cat-like steps across the lawn, silently drawing nearer and

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nearer, came the figure—that long, dark coat, that high-boned, pallid face, those searching, gleaming eyes—even in the faint light that streamed from the drawing-room behind her there could be no room for doubt. She opened her mouth to cry his name. Then a falling gleam of light, as he crept nearer into it, swept the breath from between her lips like a sudden body blow. For in that sudden half-lit radiance, she perceived that the man advancing so softly upon her moved with outstretched arm; and in the hand was something that shone pale and indistinct in the shifting light.

There are instants, as that in which the oarsman finds himself poised on the edge of the cataract, in which the human mind works quickly. In a swiftly darting swoop of thought, the girl's mind rushed back to this man's words of the night before, to his avowed object in coming to Newport, to his desperate, half-crazed ferocity of purpose. Then in a suddenly comprehending flash her eye dropped to the magnificence of drapery which shimmered about her in the broad, pale bar of light that fell from the window—to the glittering orders upon her breast, to the betraying strings of sapphires which swung and rippled around her

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like liquid lapis-lazuli. For whom was she taken by the desperate fanatic before her? To what fate had he devoted her? She knew.

She knew, but she stood motionless, silent. To address Elmer by his name, to discover to him her real personality—this would mean to evoke an immediate and hideous scandal, to rob Mrs. Rumbold of her last desperate chances of success. On the other hand, to cry for the help which lay ready in the house before her? —what could that mean but to bring other human beings, defenceless and unsuspecting, into the circle of death wherein she stood? If it should be Jack who came to her call! No, her fate was her fate; she would meet it alone.

After all, what did she lose? Was not this perhaps the true solution? For her, who had made of life so grotesque and insoluble a tangle, was not death the open door of escape? The dark shape crept nearer—nearer. She shut her eyes.

“Good-bye, Jack,” she whispered softly to herself. And with head gallantly uplifted, she stood facing death with a smile.

XVII.

IN her ears sounded a suddenly pulsating roar, through her closed lids flashed a blinding vermillion in the glare of a sudden flash. "This is the end!" she said to herself. Then—

"Princess!" cried a voice near by her—a dear, well-known voice. Opening her eyes, she saw Jack leaping down toward her from behind the acetylene search-lamps of a huge, loud-roaring car. Horror for his endangered safety was her only thought.

"No, no!" she cried with a desperate gesture, "don't come near me—no, no!"

Jack stood stock-still in hopeless bewilderment. "What?" he said. Then, following the direction of her rigidly staring eyes, he turned toward the dark, thin form which still stood with outstretched hand behind him. The girl took in her breath. Then—

"Is this Mr. Borridaile?" asked the harsh, quick tones of Elmer Morrow.

"It is," retorted Jack grimly. Then turning

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with fierce solicitude toward the girl, who had shrunk back from the betraying glare of the lamps—"Has this fellow been annoying you?" he asked swiftly.

She stretched out one cold and tremulous hand, in a vain hope of drawing him away from the deadly peril before him. Morrow advanced quickly. His arm was outstretched. "No, no!" she whispered again. Then the blaze of the motor-lamps, falling upon his hand, revealed to her the white object which it held extended—not the silver-wrapped missile of last night, but a letter.

She stared. Was it possible? Was it possible?

She was dimly conscious of Jack's eager leap forward, of his quick grasp which clutched the letter extended to him, of his short, deep laugh of relief—"Thank God!"

"It's yours, sir?" asked the voice of Elmer Morrow.

From Jack's face, ruddy in the kindling light, the careworn lines and pallor had already vanished away, and his eyes were the eyes of a man newly delivered from an unspeakable anxiety. The girl's heart smote her in a shame too deep for words that hers should have been

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the hand to inflict, if only for a few hours, such suffering upon him. And she bowed silently as Jack turned to her with a brief word of explanation and apology.

“This happens to be a rather important paper, which disappeared unaccountably last night,” he said, “and which has caused me some anxiety. You’ll excuse me one moment while I question this man, Princess?”

Again she nodded in silence. And in a passion of gratitude, not so much for the life which Elmer Morrow had unwittingly spared to her, as for the boon more precious than life which he had brought her, she stood listening to his glib answers to Jack’s searching questions, as he repeated parrot-like the story which she herself had put in his mouth the night before.

There was a sudden step behind her, a familiar, detested voice.

“Aha, my brave, here you are! Princess, here is your cloak—allow me, madame! And, *mon Dieu!* what is this?”

Jack, glowing with delighted relief, explained his good fortune to his friend. The girl, listening to the latter’s warm congratulations, almost spoiled the situation by laughing aloud. So she stood with eyes downcast, a

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little withdrawn into the shadows, lest a stray glance might betray her appreciation of the ironical quality of the situation. Meanwhile Jack's gentle inquisition went on:

"But tell me, my man—why, when you realized that this letter was probably of some importance, did you not return it at once?"

"Ain't I tried to?" replied Elmer, with some sullenness. "I come here this mornin', but the young chap that opened the door, he fired me out like I was askin' for somethin' instead of bringin' it. Then I tried to speak with some of the other help—turned down agin. So then I laid fer you out in the road there, and when you come along in your automobile, I tried to hail you, but the cop he told me to move on—"

"And so," Jack interposed with kindly severity, "the only means left you was to come prowling over the lawn after dark, alarming the lady into the agitation I saw just now?"

In suddenly kindling terror, the girl took in her breath. Poor Elmer, beyond a doubt, had done nobly; but if thus closely questioned, who could tell what he might not divulge? And that the supposed annoyance to her should be made the pretext for an inquiry which might at

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any moment end so disastrously for her, made the present situation near to intolerable.

“Indeed, monsieur,” with some impatience she addressed Jack in French, “I assure you the annoyance to me was purely imaginary.”

She stopped short on the word. The French language was to her after all no more than the ambush of the ostrich—often enough, in her girlhood days, the old friend before her had heard her display her accomplishment in that direction. And now if, in the incautiousness born of sudden amazement, he should recognize and betray her! In quick panic she turned toward the door; but her steps were almost immediately halted by the silky tones of the Hungarian’s voice:

“My dear Jack—it seems to me that you take a great deal for granted. You find this man in possession of a valuable document—you find him, as you say, prowling like a thief over your grounds at night—and yet you accept his very improbable story of picking up the letter on the driveway last night. Now my advice to you, my dear friend, would be to have the man detained, and the affair sharply looked into.”

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Barely checking her exclamation of amazement, the girl turned. That the prince, who last night had so thoroughly compromised himself in Morrow's presence, should now go out of his way to urge the detention of a witness possessed of knowledge that might be his ruin! Then, as swiftly, she recognized the subtle malice of the stroke. Any testimony which Morrow might give must involve the Grand Duchess as well as the prince. He could afford to take his chances on Morrow's silence, for the sake of the additional weapon which the man's detention and possible testimony placed in his hand. And even in the extreme case, should Morrow dare to peach on him—who would take the word of an ex-convict, and of an impostor such as herself, against a nobleman of the prince's rank and character?

The four stood silent, in a brief interim fraught for three of them with strangely thrilling possibilities, while the unconscious Jack Borridale weighed his reply:

“It is possible, Prince, that you may be right. See here, my good chap!” he turned to the silent Elmer, waiting motionless in the dark. “You have done me a great service, the promised reward is at your disposal. But, you under-

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stand, there is something a bit fishy about all this! I regret to say I shall have to have you detained and the details of the matter looked into. Your friend among Mrs. Rumbold's servants, for instance—”

In a moment's dizziness, the girl swayed against the vine-covered pillar of the veranda. To do her justice, it was the peril to Elmer, the ungrateful reward which by her means was now being dealt out to him for his faithful and difficult fulfilment of her trust, that weighed like tragedy upon her soul. But even in that desperate and generous panic, self-preservation was not entirely forgotten. The bare thread of possible escape held out by Mrs. Rumbold's coming negotiations with the prince—how completely it must be rent and snapped by any detailed inquisition of poor Elmer; by any such search among the Stormcliff servants as that threatened by Borridaile's words! Forgetting the immediate risk in the greater danger looming behind, disregarding, above all, any peril to herself in the undeserved punishment threatening the faithful old friend who unknowingly stood before her, she stepped desperately forward into the blazing white light of the acetylene motor-lamps.

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“Mr. Borridaile,” she said breathlessly, “if it is on my account that you intend to punish this man who has done you so great a service—then, I beg you, understand clearly that he has been guilty of no offence toward me! But, rather, if you take me into consideration at all in the matter, let me plead as his advocate! I am perhaps meddling with matters beyond my concern, but, you see”—for one moment her lips halted on the words framed for them by her flying brain—“you see, monsieur, at home I see so much of injustice, so much of cruelty—here, at least, let me see mercy! To me his story sounds most reasonable. Give him your thanks, monsieur, and his reward, and let him go!”

In Jack’s gaze, bent upon her in the keen radiance of the search-light, she beheld a generous admiration of her ardor, a glad surrender to her request. She turned to Elmer—their eyes met. The blaze of light made any sign of weakness on her part an impossible thing, but her heart stood still as she read in his glance a complete and astounded intelligence.

In that revealing moment, he had recognized her! She lowered her eyes helplessly. Her secret lay at the mercy of this poor wretch’s incautious

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word, of his irrepressible amazement. With swift resolution she forced her careless gaze back to that dark glance, bent upon her from beyond the white radiance of the lamps. Then, like light flashing from the edge of a knife, she beheld his swift eyes travelling to the tall form of the prince beside her. In that keen, secret glance, as plainly as on a printed page, she read Morrow's recognition of his last night's opponent, his recollection of her own words, his perfect understanding which suddenly pieced together the scattered and baffling elements of the fantastic situation into one comprehended whole. She held her breath tight against her laboring heart—now, surely, the end must come! But the necessity of loyalty, in the unsteady soul before her, served to clamp even its wild amazement in the shackles of silence. Her breath came fluttering back to her lips. Elrner, who had asked no better than to serve her, had indeed served her well! Jack's voice cut in on the whirl of her thoughts:

“You are right, madame,” he said briefly. “Here, my man, I formally retract any doubts I may have expressed of you. You are free to go and come as you choose. To-night as you see I am engaged, but come at twelve to-morrow

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morning; you will find your check ready waiting for you—with my best thanks. You have done me an incalculable service, I can assure you."

The stranger's voice broke hollowly over the pent-up storm of emotion which one of his listeners, at least, knew to be raging beneath his shabby and half-concealed exterior. "All right, sir," his tone though broken was full of a resolute independence; "though before you talked of suspectin' me, you might have found whether I was after your check—which I ain't, you see. Thank you jest the same, but you won't see me in the mornin'." With a sudden stiffening of his lank form he turned away from Jack's protests to the girl still standing rigid in the light.

"Thank you, lady!" he said simply. Pity was in his haggard eyes—pity, an anguish of helpless concern, of inextinguishable yearning. "I don't understand, but I know you're in trouble," his eyes said, like the mournful eyes of a faithful spaniel. "I'd give my life to serve you, but there's nothing I can do!"

She bowed gravely to conceal the betraying moisture which flashed responsively into her eyes. The next moment Elmer had melted

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into the darkness as silently and mysteriously as he had come.

“Upon my word!” said Borridaile, with a long breath of bewilderment. Then, as with a caressing touch he fingered the precious document just restored to him, “I was a brute to that poor chap!” he burst out regretfully; “to-morrow I must have him searched for, if only to make my apologies. I owe it to you, Princess, that I am not guilty of worse ingratitude toward him. You were right, I admit. But then, when are n’t you right?”

A flare of soft, rosy light poured from the suddenly opened door behind them, mingling with the blue-white blaze in which they stood. Soft voices and laughter broke the ominous and rustling stillness of the night. In a moment the *porte cochère* swarmed with the chattering members of the dinner company, with footmen and chauffeurs, and automobiles arriving from the garage. Jack added a hurried word to his last speech.

“One moment, Princess—I must go at once to telephone my chief of this fortunate find, and send word to the police. Beyond a doubt, this is my lucky night.” For one moment his eyes rested in hers—and uncontrollably,

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poignantly, her eyes answered him. "Yes," he said beneath his breath, "in spite of everything, Princess, this *is* my lucky night!"

As they turned toward their automobiles, Mrs. Rumbold halted for one instant to pin up a dark, curling lock in her imperial guest's coiffure, slightly ruffled by the damp night breeze.

"You have come to no arrangement with the prince?"—her whisper was as cold and barely perceptible as her touch. "Very well, now is my turn—we'll see if I make the same failure as you!"

XVIII.

THE next morning's sun, peering through the dark silk blinds of the Grand Duchess's apartment, wakened its occupant from a short and feverish sleep. From his white fur rug beside her bed, Vassily rose up yawning and stretching his long limbs, like another white fur rug suddenly quickened into life. "Get up, lazy mistress," his blue eyes seemed to say, "get up, come outdoors and play with me!"

But from his innocent and engaging glances, his mistress's eyes shot fiercely to the clock on the mantelpiece.

Seven o'clock—only five hours now! She sat bolt upright against her pillows, all sleep smitten from her by the returning horror of that creeping danger whose presence never left her, day or night.

Why, last night, had she so far yielded to the weakness of the flesh, in the exhaustion born of her long-continued strain, as to allow herself to be urged home from the baccarat party by the over-attentive Borridaile, before her hostess

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was ready to accompany her? Why had she not at all risks, at all hazards, learned last night from Mrs. Rumbold's own lips the outcome of her interview with the antagonist who held her fate in his pitiless hands? Was it not, plainly speaking, mere cowardice that had urged her to cherish, as long as might be possible, the vain and pitiful hope held out to her by her hostess's over-confident attempt? The hope was indeed atrophied to the point of nothingness; still it was a chance, a bare chance. And now—how long must it be before she could decorously gain admission to Mrs. Rumbold's carefully guarded apartment? Two hours at the least. In this sleepless, torturing suspense, how pass those wearily dragging moments?

To her ears came, as though in answer, the twitter of the birds and the faint, half-heard murmur of the sea. In an irrepressible impulse that touched her hurt soul with the comfort of balm, she leaped from her bed. And in an incredibly short space of time, she and Vassily were flying, tubbed, curled, and dressed, past the sentinel Petroff, down beneath the stone arches of the great staircase outside her window.

Though the sun was already far up from the horizon, the closed blinds of the villa told

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of a household sunk in sleep, and the grounds were deserted save for the silent gardeners who moved with rake and mowers over the green, velvety lawn. On rose-trees and laburnums hung the spangled wetness of the dew, and the still air was touched with the clear freshness of the early morning. For one moment the girl stood smiling at the blue sky, the unwrinkled sea, and the white gulls which swooped in swift aerial circles over the sparkling green vines of the pergola. She moved enmeshed in a dark net of falsehood and intrigue which she herself had woven; she stood face to face with the imminence of open disgrace; her heart was seared and stinging with the flame of a love as impossible as it was real and passionate—but, nevertheless, she and the morning were young together, and all about her was the living fragrance of the sea.

By one half of her blood, at least, she came of a race to which for generations the smell of salt water had been as the breath of life. And now in the lonely stillness of the early morning it seemed to her that she found herself suddenly face to face, not with her feeble, tormented self, but with a dear friend long familiar, with a great mother that could never fail her. Upon her

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soul knocked the echo of half-remembered words—“*There is no sorrow but the sea can drown.*” And drawn by the lure of an inward yearning hardly less deep and living than the torments of love and fear that urged her restless feet, she flew down the dew-wet marble steps toward the shimmering watery floor below her.

With the dog leaping beside her, she entered the walled enclosure of the little artificial harbor where, motionless between high, curving breakwaters, Mr. Rumbold’s fleet of crack racers and dandy pleasure-boats lay waiting at their moorings. Floating beside the white stone steps, as though left expressly as a temptation for the first comer, was a slim, pale-green canoe.

In a moment’s hesitation the girl stood surveying it; while Vassily, dipping his feathery white paw in the water, gazed at her wistfully. “Dear old *chéri*,” she said regretfully, “I love you so much, but a little canoe is hardly the place for a big dog like you. Lie down, good puppy, lie down! You ’ll wait for your mistress, won’t you?”

She bent to pick up the paddle which lay convenient in the bow of the little craft. Below her feet tinkled the faint, hollow music of the

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almost imperceptible ripples. "All sorrows," she whispered to herself, "even my sorrows, you can drown, my dear old sea—whether I sail over your beautiful surface, or whether I lie down asleep beneath it. Come, little boat! We are going to take a voyage together, you and I!"

XIX.

THIS was not the first morning that Jack Borradaile, under the sting of a sharper necessity than that of sleep, had returned to float wistfully over the certain portion of the bay whence, like Romeo, he could gaze upon a certain balconied window. And this morning, newly released as he was from the grinding anxieties which yesterday had threatened the abrupt and disgraceful termination of his career, he had set out on his early sail with a heart for the moment almost as gay as a boy's. To be sure, as his aunt had significantly said to him only last night, Endymion was in his grave, and the moon was as far out of reach as ever—but the Grand Duchess, for all her imperial rank, was no cold moon-goddess, but a living, breathing woman.

The soft warmth of the glance which now and then she had flashed upon him, came into his mind with a glow which was almost as real as that produced by her bodily presence. Certain inflections of her voice, mysteriously sweet,

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came back to him. How had it been possible that, even under the disguise assumed with such playful skill, he had failed to recognize those dear tones which had uttered their solemn warning to him—"Beware how you give your heart!" That the warning came too late, could not be considered as impairing her generosity in giving it; any more than he could presume to criticize the bizarre method which she had chosen to make her communication to him. She had done it, therefore it must be right.

As for the other odd qualities which now and then she had shown to him, must they not be explained by her blood, her rank, the exceptional conditions of her life? The fierce outburst of loyalty toward her unfortunate country to which she had treated him, that afternoon on the piazza of his bungalow, and which had led him so perilously near to dangerous professional secrets—after all was it not a superb sight, in these prosaic days, to see a woman whose heart was able to thrill like that of a mediæval heroine with love for the land of her birth? Yes, though there might be in her character from time to time odd, contradictory phases which in another woman might be displeasing, still

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what warmth of heart did not even her errors show! Her wild attempt to warn him from a love for herself, which could end only in unhappiness—her kindling, romantic patriotism. Even last night, with what a warmth of kindness had she pleaded the cause of that unfortunate vagabond who had returned the precious documents to him!

Before Jack's inner eye rose up in sudden, dazzling brightness, a vision of all these various kindnesses, these different evidences of a loyal and tender heart, all merged together in one concentrated and radiant beam. So sweet to all the world, what would Varvara be for the man she loved? And what would the loveliness of her beauty be, when lit by the flame of intense and devoted feeling which instinctively he divined to lie in the hidden depths of her heart! At the very splendor of that thought, he shut his eyes. Varvara's face, soft with yielding, lit with the fire of a responsive passion—the glory of it, in mere imagined vision, seemed unbearable like the unclouded sun.

He loved her. It seemed to him that in that fact not only the world but the whole universe had been swallowed up. All that had made his life before this woman came into it,

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all that must fill his days after she had gone, seemed to him now utterly purposeless and empty. The rest of the world might vanish to-morrow, and make no difference. It was she he loved—it was she he wanted. Suddenly he took in his breath. For all at once, like some dazzling incarnation of his secret visions, from between the high walls of the breakwater flashed the sudden phantom of Varvara.

Her paddle fell in her lap, and she sat staring at him, her eyes shining wide, the color coming and going in her cheeks, a magnificent apparition. Jack pushed the tiller down hard in his slow-drifting craft, and rushed to lean over the side of the gunwale nearest the breakwater. “Good-morning,” he called softly, cautiously, in a vague fear that any clumsiness on his part might blur the vision and bring him back to unwelcome wakefulness. “Good-morning, Duchess of Dreams!”

For an instant he saw her breath flutter beneath her red mouth and the white folds that hid her bosom; then a burst of laughter, oddly hysterical though it might be, brought him to a delightful conviction of his own wakefulness and of her reality. “Good-morning, Ivan Alexandrovitch!” she cried in a voice which,

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though a trifle unsteady, was as sweet to his ears as ever, "I am just starting for home, by the shortest sea-route. Where are you bound for, may I ask?"

"For Odessa!" answered Jack promptly; then with all the persuasiveness that he could force into his tone: "Come aboard, Princess! My armored cruiser will ferry you over in half the time of that small torpedo-boat of yours!"

She sat motionless, with the paddle in her lap, still staring at him, while the two small crafts slid slowly together in the smooth and oily tide. "I've left my poor Vassily alone on the shore, I promised him that I would be back soon. Beside—oh, no, I can't, monsieur. Don't you understand, I can't?"

"You can!" he replied with determination. "Whatever the case might be in Russia, here in happy America I can assure you, upon my honor, there's no reason why we should n't take a little morning sail together, and let Vassily wait a few moments more. I'm like Mohammed, I can't come to you, with no wind to fill my sails! But you have a paddle in your mountain there. Ah, Princess, please come!"

Still she confronted him, hesitating. For the first time, he was struck by the pallor of her

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cheeks and the dark circles that ringed her beautiful eyes. Man-like, his thoughts flew to the most obvious explanation. "See here," he said seriously, "there's another good reason. You're looking pale, Princess. Now I'll venture to say you have n't eaten an atom of breakfast yet this morning!"

She shook her head with a weary little smile. "Come aboard and have breakfast, please," he urged boyishly. With a little gesture of surrender, as though further resistance lay beyond her strength, the girl before him lowered her paddle in a sharp cut of the green water. A few strokes brought her within the range of Jack's alertly waiting boat-hook. He extended his hand—lightly she leaped aboard.

A moment later the green canoe trailed bumping at the stern of the drifting white knockabout. And the skipper, delightedly doing the honors of his craft, spread the broad taffrail with tinned quail and English biscuit and every kind of cheese that was ever invented in France.

"I'm not an army, you need n't turn out your whole commissariat for me, monsieur!" cried his guest in ineffectual protest, as, with an obvious determination to reward his eager

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friendliness, she turned her languid appetite toward the sandwiches which he busily prepared.

To have her there as his guest, all to himself in the solitude of the morning, seemed to Jack so delightful that for the moment he forgot all about the doubts and the tormenting certainties which usually oppressed him in her beloved presence.

“Look!” she cried suddenly, shading her bright eyes with her hand. And Jack, becoming for the first time aware of a whimpering, splashing sound that filled the air, looked back toward Mr. Rumbold’s harbor in the direction indicated. Trailing a sparkling wake of bubbles, a sharp white-and-black nose cut the water like the fin of some swiftly following shark. And in a moment two beseeching blue eyes looked up from the green shadows beside the boat, and a wailing, clamorous voice besought humbly for admittance.

The Grand Duchess burst into reckless laughter. “Here’s spirit,” she said; “here’s determination! Naughty Vassily, I told you to wait. Now go home, bad dog. Go straight back to the steps and wait for your mistress! No, you can’t come aboard. I’m sorry, but you must go home.”

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“No,” cried Jack, “don’t send him home. I sympathize with him, you see—a sort of fellow-feeling. Go forward, Princess, so he shan’t wet you.”

“But you can’t lift him, that enormous creature!” she protested, as he rolled up his sleeves and leaned over the side of the boat.

“Can’t I?” he retorted, with pardonable pride. And a moment later, as the Grand Duchess, laughing, took quick advantage of the shelter of the sail—a half-minute later, a shining, silvery monster showered the deck with his flying spray, and ecstatically licked the brown hands which had so effectively befriended him.

“Good dog,” said Jack, rubbing the wet nose caressingly, “and now don’t soak your mistress, that’s all I ask of you, and don’t trample those sandwiches. Here’s a biscuit for you; do you care for biscuits? And now lie down here in the sun and get dry.”

“Dear dog!” said his mistress tenderly, as she stroked the glistening head beside her, “the gentleman is very good to us, is n’t he?” She glanced up at Jack, with a flicker of tragic seriousness in her large eyes. “You are strong, monsieur, like two men! And you have the kindest heart in the world, I think”—she

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finished in a little quick undertone, as though thinking aloud. But before Jack could reply her mood had changed again, and she began to feed Vassily with sandwiches.

With a little frank gesture, uncoquettish as a child, she dragged from her arms the long gloves that hid their whiteness, and tossed them, together with her broad lingerie hat, into the cockpit of the boat.

“I don’t mind the sun,” she answered Jack’s unspoken warning; “it never burns me, and, beside, here I am in the shadow of the sail. Oh, lovely, lovely morning!”

She stretched out her two white arms toward the little fleecy clouds that dotted the sky above her. Her black hair, released from the concealing screen of the wide ruffled hat, showed red lights in the sunlight, and little dark rings that curled softly against the creamy skin of her neck. She seemed a creature ineffably young, and fresh, and living. Jack, staring at her, closed his jaw in the strength of a sudden purpose. After all, she was no more than a woman; and had he the courage of his love, he was no less than a man!

“Ah, monsieur,” she cried, “you don’t know, it is impossible, really, that you should

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know, how delicious this is for Vassily and me, to find ourselves floating here for one moment of freedom on the beautiful wide sea! All my griefs and shames and bitter grinding memories—I 've left them behind me on the shore where they belong! And out here on the salt water, with the sound of it and the smell of it all about me, and the swaying rhythm of it under my feet, I dare to be myself again. For this one little moment between the past that I leave behind me and the future that waits for me I 'm myself, and I 'm alive—yes, I 'm alive!" Her voice went high and thrilling; the words were torn from her, it seemed, as though by some other power than her own free will. With a little wild gesture, she clasped her white hands above the curling shadows of her hair. "Ah, this world is a glorious place," she said; and like the blaze of a salt-sprinkled fire, her long eyes shot their sudden blue flames at Jack. "This world is a better place than the heaven they tell us of," she cried again, "and to think I never knew it until this moment!"

Slowly Jack rose to his feet. The tiller, freed from his restraining hand, swung back and forth as the boat rocked in the long rollers of the tranquil sea. "Madame," he said with blunt deter-

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mination, “if, as you say, you are happier here than at home, then why do you go home?”

She sat staring at him, her hands still twisted among the dark tendrils of her hair. Over her expressive face flickered a curious change, a faint shadow as of fear. Then with a little careless laugh, “The world is a glorious place,” she repeated, “to play in, monsieur! But when the game is played out, you see, we must all go home at last!”

At the faintly touched mockery of the speech, with its application so evidently designed for him, Jack set his teeth in sudden fixity of purpose. She was an imperial princess, this girl who sat with airy balance and laughing eyes upon the gunwale of his knockabout; about her delicate form was drawn a charmed ring, invisible perhaps in the healthy sunlight of the morning, but none the less existent and impassable. Jack spoke, not in hope but simply because he had passed the point when resistance and suppression are longer possible.

“So it has been only a game to you, Princess,” he said quietly, “but to me—well, it has n’t been play for me, that’s all. And for the rest of it, I have the most curious sensation that where you are, that’s my home—”

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“Oh, don’t!” she cried, with a swift change of voice and a sudden, quivering gesture; “don’t, please don’t!”

He stood staring down at her as she crouched upon the taffrail beside her great dog, her hand outstretched as though in warning and her large eyes fixed imploringly on his face. She looked very little, somehow, very helpless and very sorrowful, and his tone was gentle with the sweetness and the pain of a new-born hope, as he answered her slowly:

“No, madame, I will say nothing, you can be sure, to give you pain. But what harm can it do, even to an imperial princess, to hear a man tell her—only once—that he loves her with all the strength and honesty of his heart?”

“Oh, don’t!” she said again, with a sharp in-take of her breath—“you must n’t say so—I must n’t listen to you—it’s all so impossible; don’t you see for yourself?”

She turned toward him piteously, and at the sight of the weakness in her quivering face, his heart was touched with sudden self-forgetful compensation. “I see,” he said gravely, “and all the more I beg your forgiveness. You mean—it is really impossible?”

She nodded, and her chin quivered. An

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overmastering impulse drove Jack on, to turn the knife in the wound which ran already so deep in his heart. "But if it were n't impossible," he said quickly, "then you mean—you mean—"

She lifted her face and tried to speak; and over the unspoken words which her trembling lips refused to frame, she smiled at him.

"Varvara!" he said very softly—then, rising to his feet in sudden purposeful strength, he took her hand in both of his.

"Then why should it be impossible?" he cried in quick resolve. "If you love me, is there anything in the world that is impossible? If we love each other, where in the world is the power to keep us apart? Beside the fact of our love, what is name, or rank, or all these foolish inventions that we like to make ourselves miserable about? Tell me, dear, is it true—do you really love me?"

She looked at him, still silent, and nodded slowly. Then as she heard his answering breath, and felt his grasp tighten upon her hand:

"But what does that matter?" she cried in a little weeping voice which thrilled his heart; "whether we love each other or not, we are still a thousand miles away from each other. Ah, *mon Dieu!*" she broke out with

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sudden wildness—"the chains—the chains, if you knew of them, that hold me down!"

Across Jack's troubled thoughts smote the blackness of a sudden idea. In spite of himself, his mind ran back with a curious instinct of self-torture to his jealous pangs of the first night that he had met her, and to her own anguished outburst at the recollections evoked by the ambassador's words. Was it the dead grand duke, in his far-off imperial tomb, that stood between them? For the thousandth time he rebelled in grudging, inward fury against the fact of her widowhood. No matter how well he loved her, he could never be the first! "You are thinking of—your husband?" he asked painfully.

"No!" she answered with a shiver, as she withdrew her hand from his.

"You will tell me the truth?" he persisted gently; "when you speak of the obstacles between us, you are thinking perhaps of some barrier more vital and painful even than the difference of rank? There is—some one that stands between us?"

She averted her head. "You 'll know all about it, soon enough," she returned; "soon, soon enough!"

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"But must I wait till then?" he pleaded sadly. "Can't you give me that much of your confidence, dear? Tell me—is there any one you have left behind you in Europe and must go back to again?"

She shook her head with a little dreary laugh. "Oh, no!" she answered, "not that, indeed!"

"Then," he persisted, "some one—in America?" She was silent. His tormented fancy ran back over the past two weeks, to the admirer dangling always at her elbow, conspicuous not only for his devotion, but by the fact that he alone, in the Western world, was of rank conceivably admitted by her as equal to her own. "Not"—he hesitated—"not Debreczin?"

She turned back to him, trying to smile, trying to deny. But the betraying blood, which under the stress of this inquisition had forsaken her face, came back to it in a rush of distressful scarlet.

"I see," said Jack quietly; "then here is the long-sought explanation why you were allowed to come to our barbarous America. You are to marry Prince Debreczin!"

She found her voice. "No, no, indeed!"

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she cried in an explosion of the distress pent up within her. But the denial served in no way to lift the cloud from the gloomy eyes which Jack bent upon her.

“Varvara,” he said, “if it is admitted that we love each other, then there can be no question of impertinent curiosity between you and me. I demand, I think, no more than I have a right to know, when I ask you of this mysterious tie between Debreczin and you, this hold of his which gives him the power to stand between you and me—” He stopped abruptly. A dark thought, unspoken, almost unthought, cast its flickering shadow for one instant between them.

She sprang to her feet. Vassily, whimpering, thrust his cold nose into her outstretched hand.

“No, no!” she cried, “no, nothing like that—I’m not wicked, indeed! I can’t bear to have you think—” She broke off suddenly, staring at him, while from her kindling features, as from a wind-blown lantern, the sustaining radiance sank and died. “No!” she added in a quiet despair which overbore his breathless protests—“no, think of me as you please. However wicked you believe me, you can’t think me as worthless a sinner as I really am. Oh, you ’ll know, you ’ll know soon enough!—

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and all I ask of you, when you hear the whole shameful truth, is, out of all this love you offer me, to give me no more than just a little charity!"

Borridaile, putting out his sunburned hand, took her trembling white fingers in his firm clasp. "Princess," he said sturdily, "I admit I cannot understand your words, but I can do better than that—I can read your eyes, I can understand your soul! My diplomatic training has not been long, perhaps, but it has given me some insight into men and things—and, beside, there is in these things an instinct that cannot deceive us. You tell me of your sins? I tell you that here is your first one, in telling me what is not true! On the purity and faith of your soul, though you and Debreczin and the Court of Russia assure me of a thousand mysteries to the contrary, I stand ready to stake my life and all I have. Varvara, listen to me!"

With a little shuddering sigh, she drew her hand from his. "I don't know," she said, "whether you are moved by my reasons, but the reasons themselves, at least, remain unmoved and immovable! Ah, *mon Dieu!*!" she cried with a little quick break in her voice, "what's the use of talking about it any more? Let us go home!"

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Even in the dumb perplexity of his suffering, her last words recalled Jack to a sudden sense of his surroundings. Looking out upon the world about him, he became conscious that a light wind had caught the sail, and his boat was sliding quickly past cliffs and clustering cottages toward the white line of Bailey's Beach. In a moment he had pushed down the tiller, drawn in the sheet, and pointed the knockabout's nose by the wind for the green point of Stormcliff. The light craft heeled to the breeze, the faint air freshened and drove her over the long, wrinkling rollers that swung in slowly from the sea.

The Grand Duchess, perched high upon the windward rail, looked down upon Jack with eyes whose dumb anguish seemed strangely out of harmony with the jaunty airiness of her position. "Let us go home!" she said again.

Jack looked at her in wonder. "Yes," he said under his breath, "it's true, I think. If it's no more than the force of my love compelling yours, I do believe that you care a little bit for me!" Then as she turned her head away, with a little glistening line of wetness marking the curving outline of her cheek,

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Jack leaped to his feet in a sudden heat of determination.

“Princess,” he said in a quick, changed voice, “do you know how to sail a boat?”

She nodded, with a little sad look of surprise and perplexity. Then suddenly she started, as a dull, muffled roar came over the water. Jack laughed excitedly.

“No,” he said, “not like that fool of a yachtsman—I won’t ask you to weigh anchor or to fire off the cannon, Princess! But come here—take the tiller!”

With a little wondering glance, she slid from her airy perch and obeyed; and with careful paws her dog followed her. Jack, standing beside her, pointed with his hand at the long, low-lying point across the bay.

“Look there, Princess,” he said. “You see that distant shore, with the rocky point and the village beyond?”

She nodded, still wondering; and, swayed toward him by the motion of the leaping boat, she waited silently for his next words.

“That village, madame, is known as Little Compton,” Jack went on, with an odd, masterful tone in his voice; “not indeed that that fact is worthy of being called to your attention, but

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if you will look again, you will see a church spire—a little white spire that points up through the trees beyond the windmill. You see the church spire, Princess?"

"Yes," she answered slowly. "I see it!"

"And you know, Princess," Jack went on—"no, don't turn your head away, I beg you!—you know, perhaps, what miracle can be done in a church—even in a little white village-church of New England? Answer me, I beg!"

Again she nodded, this time slowly and hesitatingly; and in spite of her evident inward suffering, a sudden color dyed her wet cheeks with its mounting carmine. Jack surveyed her in sudden ecstasy.

"Yes," he said in triumph, "you do care! Princess, you come of good old fighting stock; are n't you brave enough, for the sake of something that is very sweet and precious to us both, to break through those chains, and throw away your title and your royalty and your castle in Lithuania that bores you so, for the sake of the love that I have for you, and you have—yes, you cannot deny it!—for me? What else in life, Varvara, is worth thinking of, but just that love? And is n't it a more terrible thing to think of facing life without it—all alone—than

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to brave the anger and the indignation of the emperor, six thousand miles away? When you are my wife, dear, don't you see, you 'll be an American too, and we can defy the power of all the Russias to lay a finger on you. As for Debreczin—I snap my fingers at Debreczin! These mysterious sins of yours—I 'll take the burden of them on my shoulders! Your sins? Pshaw! We 'll seal them up in a despatch-box, with your sapphires and your diamond cross and your stars and orders and medals, and send them back, express paid, to his Imperial Majesty. And I 'll buy you more jewels, dear, bigger and prettier—I 'll buy you such lots more!"

She stood blushing, trembling, hesitating. With a sudden gesture of determination, Jack seized her unsteady hand and closed the soft white fingers over the straining stick of the helm.

"There before you, straight before you as our course points now," he said excitedly, "is the church at Little Compton, where with this breeze we can be in a half-hour. Keep her as she goes, Varvara, and inside of an hour you will be my wife, and I 'll be your husband, to take care of you and fight for you before the whole world. That 's what it will mean,

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Varvara, if you keep her on her course across the bay. But on the other hand, if you choose, you can put the tiller hard down and bring her about—back to Newport and the Court of Russia and the chains again. Here, Madame the Admiral, the ship is yours!"

With a little eager laugh that caught curiously in his throat, he turned away. "I 'll sit in the cock-pit with Vassily here," he said, "and we 'll leave everything to you. My dearest!" he cried in a sudden outburst of triumphant tenderness, "my dearest, I defy you to bring this boat about!"

With a final glance at the bright figure with the melting eyes and the dusky, wind-blown hair, he sank from his tall height to a long-legged knot, to dispute the small floor space with the huge Vassily. The dog, whose white coat was already dry and glistening in the sun, surveyed him with friendly blue eyes and the offer of a slender pointed paw.

"Your little missus is taking us on a journey, my dear dog," Jack confided to him in a happy undertone; "then you 'll be my dog, too, you see, and she 'll be my missus, do you understand? Give us your paw, good old chap. We 're going to be *such* friends!"

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Suddenly the sloping floor beneath him swayed and wavered, then righted itself to level. With a flapping of canvas and a clatter of block and halyard, the boat stood for an instant quivering in the eye of the wind. Then her white sail swung over and filled away; the green water rose to her leeward rail; and leaping over the long, slow rollers, the knock-about stood on her homeward tack, back to the Newport shore again.

XX.

LETTY RUMBOLD, who had as usual been out for the early morning horseback exercise recommended for her stout figure, came lumbering heavily up the wide staircase of the central hall. With impatient fingers she rapped upon her mother's door. Then following volcanically upon the knock, she entered the spacious and flowery room where that lady, instead of reclining lazily upon her pink silk cushions, as usual at this hour, was sitting bolt upright talking excitedly into the telephone. Her haggard eyes commanded her amazed daughter to silence.

“Very well, Jim—then you 'll see the *Evening Flier* and the *Hurricane* and *Town Tidbits*—you 're afraid it 's no use? Offer them anything, Jim, anything! But there are others that can 't be squared? You advise a trip to the Far East on the *Lotus*? No, Jim, we must stand our ground. Oh, I shall die of shame, I know I shall! Good heavens, my dear, do what you *can*!”

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With a brief word of farewell that ended in an exclamation of despair, Mrs. Rumbold flung the glittering little instrument upon the bed. In sudden wonder, Letty surveyed the dark-ringed eyes and haggard lips before her. "Whatever have you eaten, mamma," she inquired practically, "to make you look so ill?"

Her mother continued to stare at her with unseeing eyes; then coming suddenly and peevishly to herself: "Well, Letty? Don't stand staring there—what is it?"

A word was sufficient to unlock the bubbling fountain of news before her. "Oh, mamma! I've just been down on the terrace, and I saw Jack Borridaile's knockabout coming in from a sail. And who do you suppose he helped out and rowed ashore—and kissed her hand, right on the harbor steps—who do you suppose?"

For a moment her mother's wandering eyes were focused in sudden attention: "Not," she asked, "not the Grand Duchess?"

"I do mean just that," retorted Miss Rumbold in an aggrieved tone, "and you know I always told you he was falling head-over-heels in love with her, the artful thing. Of course men are always fascinated with these foreign-

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ers—and what chance could I have, beside a widow?"

To these reproaches of her ungrateful offspring, Mrs. Rumbold made no response. "Well, she can't marry him, that's one thing sure!" she observed briefly.

"It's all very well talking, mamma," argued the injured Letty, "but if you had seen the way he kissed her hand!—and then, just think of them out there in the boat together, for hours and hours. Just getting in, at ten o'clock—who knows when they started?"

"Well, that's no more than a princess is privileged to do, if she chooses," responded Mrs. Rumbold, with vague but pointed charity; "but as for marrying, you know, my dear child, that that is out of the question." With a sudden gesture which sent the pillows flying in a rosy flurry about her, she flung out a despairing hand.

"Out of the question?" she cried, "everything is out of the question now—we're finished, done for! What do these foolish little details matter now, when everything is going smash around us?"

Letty stared. "Has papa gone long on a falling market again?" she asked practically.

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Mrs. Rumbold wailed on her bed. "Worse than that, my child—my poor, ruined darling!"

"Shall I send Céline to you, mamma?" asked Letty calmly, "you are very ill."

With an effort Mrs. Rumbold pulled herself together again, "You may speak to Céline," she returned briefly, "and tell her to go to the Grand Duchess's apartments, and ask her Imperial Highness to have the graciousness to pay me a short call. Tell her to say my head is so excessively bad this morning!"

"You are going to speak to her about Jack Borridaile—that's good!" Letty exclaimed with satisfaction, as she turned away to do her mother's bidding.

In a few moments the expected guest, with face smiling, but white as the glistening linen of her gown, was ushered into the room by the deferential maid.

"Good-morning, Duchess—so many thanks for this favor!"

"Good-morning, dear madame. Do I have the unhappiness to see you ill?"

"A mere migraine, a nothing! Céline, place a chair for her Imperial Highness. Will you sit down, dear Duchess? Céline, you may go!"

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A moment's silence—a swift examination of doors, a cautious slipping of bolts—and Mrs. Rumbold, with her flowered pink dressing-gown flouncing about her, came flying back to her waiting visitor. The girl, with one hand laid upon her throat to control its laboring cords, rose to confront her.

"I see it in your eyes, madame," she observed quietly, "what I knew all along. Prince Debreczin refused to listen to you."

Mrs. Rumbold's answer, though no louder than a whisper, tore the air like a cry.

"He denied the whole business to my face! He declared the offer of money was an insult—that, having discovered our fraud, it became his duty to the widow of his friend Alexieff to expose the whole affair. The news goes back to Russia, it goes to the New York papers at noon to-day, do you hear that? To-day!"

The girl sat silent, numbed by the crushing blow that loomed so close it seemed to have already fallen. "He said, "she murmured, "that money would be no use to him." In reproaches and lamentations, Mrs. Rumbold's voice swept on:

"When everything was going so beautifully —when I had climbed so far and attained so

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much"—with a despairing gesture she swept the heap of monogrammed and crested correspondence lying scattered on the lace coverlid before her, visible sign and symbol of her social triumph—"when I had gained *this*, comes this heartless, sneaking wretch, like a house-maid with her broomstick, and sweeps the whole business away like a spider's web! And to think, if it were n't for him—for him, the one human being in this world to see through our little ruse! Why did he come to Newport? Why did he ever tell me he knew no Russian, and had never laid eyes on the Princess Varvara? Why can't he hold his wretched tongue? Why could n't you do what he wanted you to, you obstinate girl? Or, failing that, why could n't you have killed him where he stood, before you allowed him to bring this ruin on Mr. Rumbold and Letty and me?"

The girl bowed her head in patient and acquiescent suffering, then mechanically her unhappy glance went to the little Dresden clock beside Mrs. Rumbold's bed.

Ten o'clock! only two hours now until—until— She shivered at the thought as at the touch of a cold wind. From the clock-face it seemed to her that Debreczin's heavy-lidded

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eyes leered out at her with a triumphant impassivity, like those of Fate. Like Destiny herself, he held her love, her honor, her life itself, between his slowly moving hands; and like Destiny, he knew neither pity nor pause. Until this moment she had not known how strong, in spite of the Hungarian's fantastic protestations of his honor and his tale of the penalty lying over his own head in case of failure, had been the faith in the power of Mrs. Rumbold's money.

“I am sorry,” she said helplessly, “but I expected no less than to hear you had failed with him. He told me, you see, that all the money in Newport would be useless as the price of his own safety—and consequently that he would accept from me as the price of my own immunity nothing less than the service which he demanded of me—”

“And yet,” cried Mrs. Rumbold fiercely, “you refused to pay!”

The girl moved her head wearily. “I could n’t,” she answered.

“Could n’t!” repeated the other woman with scorn. “After I had picked you up out of the gutter, and covered you with gold and trusted you—yes, trusted you! Here you

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could n't put out your hand to save me from the ruin that you yourself have brought on me! Very well, then—is there any reason why I should put out my hand to save you?"

The girl's face, white before, took on a curious rigidity of line and tint. "Madame," she said with dignity, "as I told you yesterday, I am willing to disappear at any moment and rid you of my presence forever. From the self-reproach and useless sorrow that I take with me, how could you save me?"

"Indeed," sneered Mrs. Rumbold, "you are willing to disappear, are you, and leave me alone to bear the brunt of the exposure that's coming down on us to-night? I've just spoken on the long-distance with Mr. Rumbold in New York, to ask him to see the editors of the evening papers and find out what they'll take for keeping still. But he himself admits it's useless. If not one, then another; then the whole hideous crowd of them will be on my shoulders with pictures and headlines—'Mrs. Rumbold's Little Game on Newport Society'—'Fake Duchess Queens it in our Exclusive Set'—and ghastly things like that, shouted at the street corners and giggled over at every dinner in Newport—this very night! This very night!"

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She wrung her hands. In helpless misery the girl turned toward her. Mrs. Rumbold cut her short.

“Listen to me, Miss Hooper! You plan to run off and leave me to bear the disgrace alone? No! I have it all planned out—you are an imposter, a stray French adventuress, who happens to resemble the duchess, who got wind of the visit; who stole the jewels and came here to supplant her—a daring, skilful game that deceived even me! You will please make full confession to the police. I will give you the details later on.”

The girl rose to her feet with a little suppressed cry. “The police? Mrs. Rumbold, you intend to have me arrested?”

Mrs. Rumbold’s little pointed face set itself in the hardness of steel. “How else,” she said clearly, “can I make it plain to the world that I have had no part in the swindling game that you have played? It makes me appear small enough that you were able to deceive me—after my intimacy with the Grand Duchess that I have talked so much about! Still, it’s my only chance—to range myself with the rest of Newport among the people that your audacity has fooled, and to cut myself off entirely

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from you and all your works. You can make it harder for me by denying my story, if you choose; but I can promise you your ingratitude will make it none the easier for you!"

"Wait a moment," said the girl, half-inarticulately, "wait a moment—"

Her faculties, weakened by the strain of the past few days, reeled and fainted like those of a drunkard. With a desperate effort she forced herself to a right comprehension of Mrs. Rumbold's words.

Poverty, heart-break, the knowledge of her degradation in the eyes of the one she loved best—all these sorrows she had been prepared for. But, in the loss of all that made life dear, hers had been still the inalienable right which Nature herself denies to no suffering creature—the right to drag herself away to some hidden corner, alone with her pain. But now to be pilloried in public, to be openly disgraced before all the world—before him who was more than all the world to her. Not till that moment, perhaps, had she realized with how immense a tenderness, with what terrible necessity of loving, she loved John Borridaile.

All that was in her loved him. The very blood that thrilled in her veins, the life that

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kindled in her limbs and in her heart, seemed of him and for him, as the life of a plant belongs to the sunlight which has vivified it. All her life was in him. Apart from his eyes, his touch, she must be once more what she had been before that night when across the flowers of the dinner-table his glance had suddenly pierced and awakened her soul. Till then her soul had been asleep, dead. Now it must return to death again, but with this difference—that it had eaten of the Tree of Life, and had known what it was to be alive. How was she to face this death-in-life? She did not know. Ways and means lay beyond the present scope of her brain. The great primordial fact filled her whole being. She loved Jack Borridaile, and by her own sin she was separated from him forever.

This gay game of deceit, begun in such triumphant lightness of heart—who could have foreseen with what fatal rapidity its initial germ of falsehood would sprout and spread, to contaminate the whole? In vain she had struggled against succeeding temptations as they confronted her—the primal yielding, the original and fundamental sin, had been hers. On that quagmire basis of evil no structure

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but that foredoomed to ruin could ever have been erected; though this knowledge made no less bitter the realization that now the inevitable had befallen, and she was shelterless.

“Mrs. Rumbold,” she asked slowly, “you are intending to give me to the police as a swindler—to have me dragged into court with Prince Debreczin as my accuser—to have me sent to—to jail, perhaps?”

“What else,” retorted Mrs. Rumbold with peevish resolution, “is left for me to do? I’m very sorry, but your ruin lies at your own door! You refused to save yourself—very well, you can’t expect to drag me down with you, you know! My right to disown your imposture is the same as that of an Alpine climber to cut the rope that binds him to a falling comrade—it will do you no good, and me a lot of harm, to go down with you. And in view of the fact that all your good luck has come from me, and all this bad luck from your own wilful obstinacy, I really think that you might promise to uphold my story in every particular. The time is so short!”—her thin voice rose feverishly. “Come, we must get our details together—will you promise?”

The girl held her head proudly erect. Res-

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olution had come to her, resolution and a sudden kindling thought. "Madame," she said in a low tone, "you are right. Whatever your motive, you have been kind to me, and you have trusted me. I owe you in return all the reparation in my power for this ruin I have brought upon you. Draw up the story by which I can save you. I promise I will blacken myself faithfully in your behalf!"

"Now you are talking sense—there's a dear!" gushed Mrs. Rumbold, with a sigh of vast relief. The girl, however, interrupted her with a gesture quickly interposed.

"One moment, Mrs. Rumbold—there's a condition, one condition!" She hesitated a moment, while her listener stared.

"To all the world," the girl went on painfully, "I will admit myself the vile swindler and imposter that you purpose to paint me—to all the world, but one! For there's one person, you see—whom I should wish to have know the truth—"

Her voice trailed away in faltering accents of a controlled but profound suffering. Mrs. Rumbold broke into a peal of jangled laughter.

"One person!" she cried. "Hoity-toity! And who may this favored person be?"

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“The one person,” retorted the girl in tones of a recovered firmness, “in this world of shams and lies, who believes in me. The one who is far enough divided from me, heaven knows, by all the barriers between us and by the evil that I have already done. He must despise me, of course, when he learns the truth; but I should like to have him know that, at least, all this was not on my side a scheme of intended evil—that careless, thoughtless though I have been, I am not at least so sunk in sin as the published reports would make him believe. The truth, in short, as it stands between us—that is what I should wish him to know, and to him alone—just enough to save a rag of his respect, a vestige of his pity—”

“Hm, hm!” cried the lady sharply, “and this precious paragon of whom you speak—do you suppose I don’t know, young lady, to whom you are referring?”

For an instant her listener’s white face blazed to a sudden scarlet. Mrs. Rumbold swept on:

“Though I will own, when my daughter came in just now and told me of your early morning sail, I will own that I hardly believed in the possibility of such imprudence. Jack Borridaile indeed!”

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Before the veiled insult contained in Mrs. Rumbold's tones, the girl drew herself up with sudden dignity.

"And if I wish to preserve, so far as possible, Mr. Borridaile's good opinion of me, do you find that wish unwarrantable? Perhaps I owe him that much—certainly he has never failed"—for an instant her voice halted in a self-revealing break—"certainly he has never failed in respect toward me!"

"Ah!" Mrs. Rumbold's little sharp eyes ran through and through the wan and quivering countenance before her. "Ah!" she said again, as bit by bit she pieced together the mute confession of the downcast eyes before her, with all the varying circumstances of the past two weeks, culminating in the adventure of this morning. What a fool she had been not to have seen it before! Had she perhaps imperilled her beloved Letty's future establishment beyond repair? John Borridaile, in spite of his diplomatic correctness of standard, had been known at times to display a reckless disinterestedness, a dogged tenacity of purpose. And should this girl before her, in all her appealing loveliness, be allowed to go to him with her pity-compelling tale—

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"Has John Borridaile asked you," Mrs. Rumbold put the question concisely, "or not, to be his wife?"

The young woman before her rose to her feet, a tall, slim figure in her white gown. Her face was brightly flushed, her eyes sparkled wide-open. "Mrs. Rumbold," she retorted with dignity, "I have done my best to serve you, I have promised to face disgrace and disaster in order to repair, as far as possible, the mischief that I have done you. But more than that you have no right to ask. I must refuse to answer your question!"

Mrs. Rumbold turned white with anger. "But I must know!" she cried shrilly. "I have a right to know! Mr. Borridaile, young lady, is practically engaged to my daughter Letty—the union of two great American families, of two magnificent fortunes—in all respects most suitable. Now that I have told you so much, will you have the goodness to tell me: Has Mr. Borridaile been so foolish as to ask you to marry him?"

"How could he," retorted the girl quickly, "if he is engaged to your daughter?"

Mrs. Rumbold reflected desperately. Then a sudden quick thought gave her at once the

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ready answer to the girl's retort, and a weapon wherewith to make a final clutch after the establishment of her adored child.

"I said not that he *is*, but that he *was* engaged to my daughter! Why have we changed our minds and broken it off? For reasons which even in your eyes may make him less desirable as a dupe and victim! Jack Borridaile is a fraud, my dear, nothing less—a worthless young adventurer, sponging on society and diplomacy, on the strength of his aunt's name. He never had but a few thousands of his own, and *that* went in dissipation and wild-cat investments, years ago. And as for his expectations from his aunt—Mr. Rumbold has it in confidence from his solicitor that the young man's disgraceful conduct has at last driven Mrs. Borridaile to alter her will, and leave every penny to a second cousin of her husband's in Topeka, Kansas! My dear, John Borridaile is in debt up to his ears, he has borrowed from every Jew in town, he has forged his aunt's name, it is well known that he has accepted bribes for the use of his influence with the secretary of state. His aunt has bought him off so often she is beginning to be weary of the process. Any moment that she

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withdraws her countenance from him, crash! goes Mr. John Borridaile!"

Mrs. Rumbold spoke rapidly, feverishly, her eloquence accumulating facts as it rolled on its onward course. "So much," she said, "for your great speculation, my dear! I hate to disappoint you, or to betray what should be strictly confidential. But in your position I think it only right you should be warned that the game you are playing is not worth the candle!"

For one moment she stood regarding the girl at the window—whose large, melancholy eyes, bent on the watery floor beneath the terrace, seemed to follow with wistful glance the airy progress of a white-sailed boat that darted to and fro over the long blue rollers. After Mrs. Rumbold had ceased speaking, her listener turned slowly, with a startled and enigmatical glance.

"It's very wicked of me," she said in a low voice, "to listen to your horrible stories about him—but, oh, Heaven forgive me! I *want* to listen to them! You mean to tell me that Mr. Borridaile is no better than I am myself—that he is making believe to be something which he is not, and intentionally deceiving the world all about him?"

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"I mean to say just that!" retorted the lady. "Just like you, as you say, my dear—there's a pair of you, the princess and the millionaire. Would you care to have Mr. Rumbold show the proofs of what I have been telling you, I wonder, or have you heard enough?"

"I have heard enough," repeated the girl slowly. "A pair of us—there's a pair of us!" Then, glancing up suddenly: "Then tell me, Mrs. Rumbold," she cried, "what is to keep us apart?"

In the reaction of a sudden fear, Mrs. Rumbold stared at her opponent. Had her game been too keen, her weapon too subtle? Had the stroke from which she expected so much recoiled upon her from her enemy's hand?

"Tell me," said the girl again, while her triumph rose and throbbed in her accents, "if Mr. Borridaile is no better than I, how should I wrong him by accepting the offer which he makes me? If he is no more diplomat and millionaire than I am Grand Duchess of all the Russias, if he stands on the brink of a ruin as fearful as mine, if discovery is a calamity to be dreaded no less by him than by me—then how should I wrong him by accepting him as my husband?"

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For an instant Mrs. Rumbold's fertile brain reeled in a stupefied perplexity before this threatening fuse kindled by the spark of her own over-active wit. Then with a supreme effort she hurled her ready reply.

"Why is Mr. Borridaile's situation no better than your own, when he has cause as good to dread discovery as your own? I'll tell you why—because *he is not discovered!* In your fortnight's experience of the world you may have heard the maxim, 'It's not the sin, it's the getting found out that is fatal!' and Jack Borridaile is not going to get found out! His aunt, you may be sure, would sacrifice every penny of her fortune rather than allow the great name of Borridaile to be smirched by a revelation of Mr. Jack's escapades. He has family friends, professional friends, who would move heaven and earth to save him. No, John Borridaile is not going to be found out—he's not going to be paraded in the police-court, in the evening papers, his name made the byword at every boarding-house table from here to California—he's not been fool enough to leave his precious secret at the mercy of that treacherous ruffian from Hungary!"

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Limply the girl's slight form drooped against the casement by which she stood. "Please don't," she urged faintly. "I own I was wrong and you're right, you are very right."

Mrs. Rumbold, with keen eyes shining wide with a returning triumph, picked up the little telephone receiver that tinkled lightly at her elbow. "Mr. Rumbold with news from New York, I suppose," she observed eagerly. "I gave orders I should be disturbed only for something very important."

The girl at the window turned her tortured, unseeing eyes away from the little family conversation to which she was thus made unwilling witness. Suddenly her darkened consciousness was pierced by the syllables of a word which, like Dante's inscription over the gates of hell, served as key-note to the whole abandonment of her sorrow.

"The chief of police—yes!" Mrs. Rumbold's high, clear tones repeated the word with a curious hesitation. "Yes, this is Mrs. Rumbold. Hello! Put your mouth closer to the transmitter, please. Yes, the Grand Duchess is still here!"

The girl turned quickly—Mrs. Rumbold's eyes, suddenly haggard like those of a woman

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of seventy, were raised to hers. The same thought, the same realization, flashed from each to each.

By mere force of habit the girl's swift glance travelled to the clock. An hour—but there was still an hour left! Yet here, anticipating the vulgar, hideous fate which to-night would claim her, were those grim hands of the law stretching themselves relentlessly toward her. Debreczin had promised her till noon—in robbing her of this last hour it seemed to her that he had inflicted a blow more wantonly cruel than the prime fact of the betrayal itself.

"Hello!" Mrs. Rumbold's little pointed face, stiffened to the intensity of listening, was mottled in a curiously grayish pallor. "Yes—I am listening—oh, I understand!" For one instant her strangled breath escaped in a sigh of relief. "You wish to warn me to take special precautions in guarding my guest the Russian duchess? Oh, yes, certainly. Thank you so very much. The Anarchists are up to mischief again, you say?"

Terror for her own immediate safety smitten from her mind only to give place to vague, unformulated fears, the girl stepped forward. Mrs. Rumbold, however, had already regained

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something like composure, as she continued the conversation.

“Yes, I ’ll repeat your words if you wish it—you say there was a bomb-throwing right here in Newport, only an hour ago? Yes, certainly I heard the explosion—dynamite? I thought it was a yacht coming to anchor in the bay! The wretch himself was killed by the concussion, you say? Yes, I understand you—the celebrated American Anarchist, Harrow—yes, *Morrow*, you say—just out of doing time in Auburn for the same offence—yes—”

Dead!—Elmer Morrow was dead! Even in the midst of her own distress, the girl was conscious of a regretful, yearning pang that filled her eyes with tears. And in swift, pitying vision, her fancy flew back to the interview of two nights ago in the garden below—to Elmer’s white, wistful face, his glance of dumb, pathetic passion, his voice as he had said: “If I could just do something for you, dear, to make you happy as I can’t, and die doing it.” And now, poor Elmer—death was already his, without even the sorry comfort that he had asked.

Mrs. Rumbold’s sharp voice continued: “On the steps of the Yacht Club—yes, I understand. But, tell me, did the wretch do any

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damage to any one but himself? Good heavens! speak out, man! It was n't any of *my* family, I know that! Hello—yes—you say his Highness was just stepping out of his automobile—”

Through her listener's mind flamed swift thought and swifter memory: the ruthless determination of Elmer's poor, fanatical soul; the baleful glance with which, last night, he had silently recognized in the enemy of the mythical Grand Duchess the malicious and deadly foe of the girl whom, with all that was good in his unhappy soul, he so undoubtedly loved. “If I could just do something for you, dear, and die doing it.”

Had he done it?

Mrs. Rumbold's sharp notes, rising to hysteria, repeated her last question. “Hello—who's on the line? Hello, this is police headquarters again? Yes—hello! Tell me, did this wretch succeed in injuring the prince?”

Another instant's pause, tense, terrible. Then the glittering instrument fell from Mrs. Rumbold's hand with a dull thud upon the counterpane. She wet her lips once or twice carefully with her tongue, and swallowed with painful slowness.

“Prince Debreczin is dead,” she said.

XXI.

JACK BORRIDAILE'S knockabout was making long, dreary tacks up and down beneath the cliffs, from Ochre Point to Bailey's and back again. Just what there was to call him to shore again he failed to see. To be sure, the Commission was to hold an informal meeting at twelve o'clock, but the presence of the secretary was not imperatively necessary. And unless absolutely required to do so, by irresistible duty, why bring this new and bleeding wound within the range of inquisitive human eyes and wearisome human tongues?

His work, of which he had been so proud and so fond—in the emptiness of life as it now presented itself to him, where was the power of work to fill his days or his heart? And yesterday, in the desperation born of his mysterious loss and looming disgrace, he had assured his guardian powers that the lost letter, once restored, would be all he would ever ask of them! Very well, the letter had been recovered, verified, and even now was in the hands of the

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august personage for whom, and for whom alone, it was designed. His career was safe, his honor placed beyond doubt or question; and here he was, the most miserable failure in the way of a man that the Atlantic Ocean bore to-day on her long, heaving rollers.

He was not good enough to be the husband of the woman he loved—there was the plain, unvarnished truth that stared him in the face.

In spite of the strongly balanced nature which put all desperate measures out of the question, the long, white-crested waves that rolled from the bow of his craft looked to him strangely peaceful and alluring. But even in the bewildered extremity of his pain, his chief thought was not for himself but for her. "Poor little thing," he said to himself sadly, "it's rough on her, too. Poor little thing, she cried when we said good-bye." And even the secret pang of delight that lay hidden at the core of his suffering—to know that through all the darkness of their inevitable separation her love would follow him—even this solitary ray of joy was turned to bitterness in his generous heart. No, even for love of him, he would not, with his own good will, let a dark day enter into her life!

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His boat, lying down to the fresh sea wind, drew her swift course beneath the high-walled terrace and gray towers of Stormcliff. With self-denying resolution, Jack turned his head away. What was the use of gazing, like the silly fox in the fable, after those beautiful grapes that hung so high above his head? What he was suffering served him just right; he should have known better in the first place; he was rightly punished for his vanity and his audacity.

No, he would not look! Leaping from wave to wave, his boat was almost abreast of the breakwater whence Varvara had this morning emerged. Above him was the window—after all, just one look!

His heart leaped painfully, and through his body was a curious sensation, as though the blood had quivered in his veins. In the dinghy near him, propelled by a sailor with *Lotus* in large red letters across his breast, was a fluttering white figure which stood up and waved to him.

“Wait a moment!” shouted Jack. Starting to his feet, he cast off his neatly coiled main halyards, so that the white sail came down with a run, thundering in the wind and dipping

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its white folds into the sea. Then Jack pushed his tiller hard down and hove his boat to, under her bit of jib. On the long green wash of the rollers she rocked, held between wind and tide; while her skipper, leaning out over the gunwale, seized the dinghy with his boat-hook and drew her with cautious skill to the side of the dancing craft.

“Just a moment, Mr. Borridaile, please!” cried the voice which in all the world he loved best to hear; though touched with what subtle change, what new charm? Even in the rush and hurry of the moment, Jack noticed that her little trilling lisp had gone, and he heard her voice for the first time in a pure and limpid English. “Mr. Borridaile, will you help me aboard, please? Just one moment—the man will wait. There—thanks, here I am quite safely.”

They stood face to face on the unsteady floor of the cockpit, while the sailor, dropping to a discreet distance, waited obediently for his passenger’s return. “Varvara!” cried Jack. “What is it, tell me quickly!”

Her cheeks were still white, but her blue eyes shone dark and glittering against the dusky wind-blown background of her hair.

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Never before, Jack thought, had he seen her look so lovely, so utterly desirable. "Jack!" she cried, and at that name his pulses leaped in a sudden triumph—a triumph swiftly subdued by the sudden sombreness of her tone and look.

"I have news for you," she said abruptly. "Prince Debreczin is dead!"

Jack stared—"Dead?" he repeated stupidly. Before the great inviolable fact of death, darkening the summer morning, touching with its faint, cold hand the warm life that thrilled in his youthful veins—before that great primal fact of death, all thought of the significance and possible consequences of this particular death was smitten from his mind.

"Debreczin dead?" his tongue dragged itself helplessly over the words—"but I ate breakfast with him, this very morning!"

"But since then," cried the girl swiftly; "you remember the shock of an explosion that we heard barely an hour ago?" Horror-smitten, stupefied, Jack nodded his assent. The girl's breathless voice swept on:

"That shock we heard, it was not a yacht's cannon, it was the explosion of a dynamite bomb from the hand of an Anarchist, on the steps of the Yacht Club above here—and

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Prince Debreczin—Prince Debreczin was blown to atoms."

She shuddered, in the sudden sickness of purely physical revulsion. Jack, forgetful of his own dismay, took her cold hands in a gesture of reverential and comforting tenderness.

"I understand," he said in a low voice, "what you must suffer in finding yourself approached for the second time in your life by this unspeakable horror. To have your husband's assassination thus hideously recalled to you—"

To his amazement, his words of respectful sympathy were cut short by a shrill and hysterical peal of laughter; though when his dismayed glance met her eyes he found no laughter there—only tears and perplexity and the extreme of a desperate resolve.

"My husband?" she cried, "that is what I have come to tell you. I never had any husband! He was a sham, a make-believe, like my title, my sapphires, everything about me!"

Jack dropped her hands. His eyes as he looked into hers were the eyes with which one looks into the face of death.

"Oh, child!" was all he said.

She read in his face the meaning which she had conveyed to him. "No," she said weakly,

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“it’s all very bad to know, but it’s not quite—so bad as you think.”

“You are not the Grand Duchess Varvara of Russia?” he asked sternly.

She shook her head wearily. At the sight of the suffering in her face, his gravity relaxed into suddenly pleading gentleness:

“But if you were going to tell me this story at all, why did you wait till now? What has happened since an hour ago?” At the word the remembrance came back to him of the newly learned and hideous disaster which this new revelation, more closely personal and more painful yet, had for the instant driven from his mind.

“The man who stood between us is dead,” he said slowly. “Debreczin is dead, so now you come to me?”

She winced before the vague, unspoken meanings of his words; then, controlling herself to a silent response, she nodded in affirmation.

Upon his next question, the answer to which must settle all the love and faith that his life held, Jack’s tongue hesitated and stumbled like that of a school-boy.

“Tell me the truth—what was Debreczin to you?”

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She lifted her blue eyes, dark with suffering, heavy with the clinging wetness of tears, to his face.

“Not that—believe me, Jack, not that! Neither he nor any one else that has ever walked the earth! But the deceit of which I am guilty, Debreczin knew. He threatened me with shameful exposure—he drove me to serve him and the Russian government in wicked, secret ways. That masquerade as the Hindu Nautch woman—that scene I made with you at the bungalow, about Russia and how I loved her—that was all it was for, do you understand? I had to get information out of you, about the Japanese treaty. Though when it came to the point I could n’t do it, do you remember? Even for Mrs. Rumbold’s sake, I could n’t do it! So I tried again another way. That letter you lost—it was I who stole it, at his bidding. Though when the time came for me to give it to him, I found again that I could n’t be so wicked as I tried to be. For I loved you, Jack! I could n’t betray you, after all, even to save her. So I defied him, and sent the letter back to you.”

Jack stared at her—“Wait a moment! Debreczin a Russian spy—Debreczin a black-

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mailer! My dear girl—are you sure there's not some mistake?"

"There's no mistake," she answered gently. "It's not so very hard to deceive an honest man like you, you know. I did it. Why should n't he?"

Jack was silent. These were deep waters into which the mystery of his love had drifted—the stolen letter, the weighty affairs of two great nations, his professional honor that had so nearly been wrecked beyond repair. Yet through the dark confusion of these appalling revelations there came to him, pure and clear as the very truth, the self-condemning voice of the woman he loved and the self-torturing candor of her eyes.

"I don't understand," he said with firmness; "but whatever harm was meditated, none was done. And of one thing I feel confident; though you may yield to an instant's weakness, never would you be guilty of any treachery toward me or any other human being. Debrezin is dead, we will let his sin rest with him. But if he traded in his knowledge of your imposture, to drive you for his own evil purposes—"

The girl stretched out her hand. "He was wicked, he was cruel, his death means for me a

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deliverance from what would have been worse than death, I grant you all that. But, oh! if he was bad, I am worse still—a swindler, a humbug who has cheated you out of your honest love. But, listen: I have come back to you, partly because I no longer have the fear of open disgrace hanging over me, partly because I have heard something just now which makes me hope that you will have charity and understanding for my mistakes—for in the beginning, Jack, it was nothing more than a mistake, I swear to you! I never meant to be really bad, but I was very lonely and helpless—and when the temptation came to me—”

“I am listening!” said Jack steadily, but his brain whirled.

She leaned toward him breathlessly.

“You see,” she said, “I came to Mrs. Rumbold’s just at the moment when she was in despair; her Grand Duchess hadn’t come, and all her plans were ruined. I had had a hard winter, Jack—my first winter in the city! You see Mrs. Rumbold herself had told me to come up from Maine to go on the stage, and that she herself would look out for me. She painted such an alluring future for me that I sold my little house and fishing-sloop that my father

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had left me, and came flying after her to New York. But she had forgotten all about me, Jack! My letters were sent downstairs again—Mrs. Rumbold turned her head away from me when I waited on her sidewalk. Oh, how lonely the streets were, Jack! And all the crowds that stared at me, so that I had to wear a veil—and the theatre managers who laughed at me and tried to take my hand when I came back to their offices, for the twentieth time, to see if they had n't a chance for me at last. My money was spent so soon—then I was sick—then I went and tried to be a housemaid, just to keep from starvation—but the master of the house was horrid, horrid!"—she shivered and Jack's fists clenched themselves—"and the lady said I was too good-looking for a servant—and I did n't know what to do, so I came back to Mrs. Rumbold. I thought if I could speak to her face to face, perhaps she would remember. You see the family I lived with had brought me to a place near here for the summer—so when I had to leave I just walked over here. I saw you, Jack, that day that I waited at the Park gate. You made that dreadful man be quiet, when he spoke so rudely to me—and, oh! but I was grateful to you!"

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“Ah—Debreczin—the little reporter—” cried Jack, dimly groping in his memory; “but she was such a huddled, stooped little thing—and she had yellow hair under her veil, I remember—”

The girl before him smiled rather bitterly. “When one has n’t eaten anything for two days, one is apt to huddle!” she answered briefly, while Jack surveyed her in bewildered and heart-smitten compassion. Then, as she touched her flying strands of red-black hair, “And as for the hair,” she said, “it does n’t take very long to change yellow hair to black—nor, thank heaven! does it take very long to change it back to yellow again!”

Jack laughed helplessly. “I’m so glad,” he said; “I love yellow hair.”

“So you see,” she went on swiftly, “when all of a sudden I was brought in out of the dark, into that splendid, glittering palace—and Mr. Rumbold came in with his wife, in all her perplexity—and all of a sudden he shouted out with his idea—what could I do? It looked so delicious, so entrancing, what they proposed to me to do—an adventure in fairyland, a glimpse of the heaven I had read about! Then the wild rush on the yacht to New York that

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night—the dash through the shops—and the study and the training and the practice—oh, I was mad with excitement, I was tipsy with delight! That what I was doing was wrong never entered my head until that first night, when you looked across the table at me—you remember, dear—and your eyes—your eyes, Jack, ran through and through me! Then, after dinner”—her voice drooped to its sombre depths—“after the dance, Debreczin came to me and told me he had recognized my cheat. In return for my services in stealing your new treaty for him, he offered me his silence. How that ended I have already told you. If I did n’t realize at the beginning that the game I have played was nothing more nor less than a colossal sin, believe me, I realize it now. Debreczin is dead—I am hardly better than dead, in the knowledge that you despise me.”

He looked at her keenly. “Despise you? So you think that I despise you?”

She laughed bitterly. “A swindler and a humbug! A poor little girl from the coast of Maine, who happened to have a French mother and a small gift for play-acting—a Duchess of Dreams, indeed! A nobody, a nothing at all!”

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"To me," said Jack slowly, "you are all the world!"

For a moment she stared at him through the blue mists of tears that filled her eyes. Then:

"Oh, Jack, I dared hope as much!" she cried, her voice thrilling to the wind. "I own, I dared hope that I might find in you understanding and charity, even for faults like mine. For Mrs. Rumbold, you see, hoping to turn me away from you—she has told me everything!"

She paused for breath. Jack, placed beyond the power of new perplexity by the various startling revelations of this enigmatical interview, merely stared at her as she swept on:

"She has told me everything—and there is the reason that I have had the courage to come back to you. For if you are nothing that you pretend to be, Jack, neither am I! If you are a humbug, so am I! There's a pair of us, dear. And I love you, do you understand? We've played the game together, now we'll repent in dust and ashes together. We'll meet disgrace together—if we have to—but together, Jack, always together!"

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She paused, flushed and kindling, and over her last amazing offer her blue eyes shone a benediction into the face beside her. Jack drew a long breath of perplexity.

“I don’t know,” he said dryly, “what my dear friend Mrs. Rumbold has been telling you about me. But at all events, dear, I should rather not see you quite so ready to believe stories so very much to my discredit. Of course”—he added hastily. But with a sharp exclamation of trouble, the girl beside him rose suddenly to her feet. Her face was curiously changed and stony, and her voice came with difficulty, as though she had been running.

“Oh, I see, I see!” she said wildly; “I’ve been a fool, I understand now. I was so glad to believe her when she said you were an adventurer and a swindler, Jack! I was so delighted to believe that you were pulled down to my own miserable level, that I never stopped to ask myself if it were likely that such an absurd story could be true. I beg your pardon a thousand times for so wronging you, believe me! I see, I have made a dreadful mistake. Will you signal the man to come up with the dinghy, please?”

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But Jack had seized her hands again in his strong clasp. "My dear, my dear!" he cried, "do you think that I could have any blame for you because, when you heard evil stories about me, instead of turning your back upon me you came and offered yourself to me? Do you think that I have anything but pity for you and your deceit, as you call it—you poor little deserted child, alone in the big, heartless world? But never alone again, dear, never again!" He paused a moment, bending over her; and their eyes met, gray eyes and blue.

"You have n't told me yet," he said smiling, "what is your name, my Duchess of Dreams!"

"My name," she answered softly, "is Angélique Hooper. Not much of a name, after Princess Varvara, is it?"

"Angélique," he repeated slowly, "Angélique Borridaile—yes, that does n't sound too bad, that combination. Look, dear!" In the light of a sudden kindling purpose, his bronzed face flushed and his square jaw set itself into lines of strong determination. With one hand still holding hers, he pointed with the other at the low-lying point of land across the bay.

"The little steeple is there still!" he said

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gravely, "and the little white church. Out of the loyalty of your heart, you refused an hour ago to come there with me. But now, my dear little Angélique, my best-beloved till the end of the world—now, now, may I point the boat across the bay?"

The deep eyes, bright with a blissful yielding, were fixed on his. "You want me?" she said slowly, "with all my faults that you know of, with the possibility of a thousand faults of which you know nothing, you still love me and trust me and ask me to be your wife?"

"I love you," he answered steadily. "I trust you as I trust nothing else on earth. Answer me—will you be my wife?"

She nodded slowly, while her trembling lips broke in a smile. Jack cast a quick glance toward the shore—they were alone. He seized her elbows in his two hands, then he bent toward her. He felt her arms quiver under his touch. "Don't, don't," he heard her whisper, "I'm so wicked—I don't deserve—"

"I love you," he said, and she was silent. But the warmth of her lips as he touched them told him more completely than any words what it was she had given him.

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"I love you," he said again with passion, "I love you!" With a violent effort he stepped back from her. They looked at each other. In each pair of eyes the other read nothing but one dazzling thought: the sweetness, the sweetness of the golden years to come.

With a short, boyish laugh of utter happiness, Jack Borridaile sprang forward to his halyards.

"There's no time to lose!" he cried swiftly; "first the little white church, very quiet and discreet—then the train from Tiverton—then New York—thank heaven, this is Saturday! So to-morrow you can wash the horrid black stuff from your beautiful hair, and send out for some new clothes, and send a man back with a check for your dear Vassily, if you want him—and anything, anything else in the world that I can get for you, dear! Then on Monday I run back here for the final meeting of the Commission, and say good-bye to my aunt, and—and to pay proper respect"—his face darkened—"to the memory of that poor wretch Debreczin, who, whatever his sins, has gone to pay for them now. Then on Tuesday, dearest!"

Her eyes, full of adoration, met his quick smile.

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“On Tuesday, dearest, we go down to Hoboken together and take the steamer to Cherbourg. In Paris, you see, we can concoct a nice little story—more of our humbug, you see, darling!—to tell when we come home again. Perhaps we can find an impecunious marquise to own you as her ward—oh, there are lots of ways in which to fool our fellow mortals, my dear, and keep poor Mrs. Rumbold’s secret from leaking out to a disrespectful world!”

“And that reminds me,” cried the girl, “I must n’t be so selfish as to forget Mrs. Rumbold—I must send some word back to her.”

“Be quick!” Jack eased off the sheet of his half-hoisted mainsail. “Here’s a page of my note-book—here’s a pencil!”

Hastily scrawling a few words, she returned the paper to him. “Read it!” she commanded, as her tender eyes smiled into his face; and with an answering smile, he read aloud:

To Mrs. Rumbold:

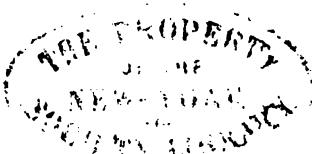
His Majesty commands my immediate presence.

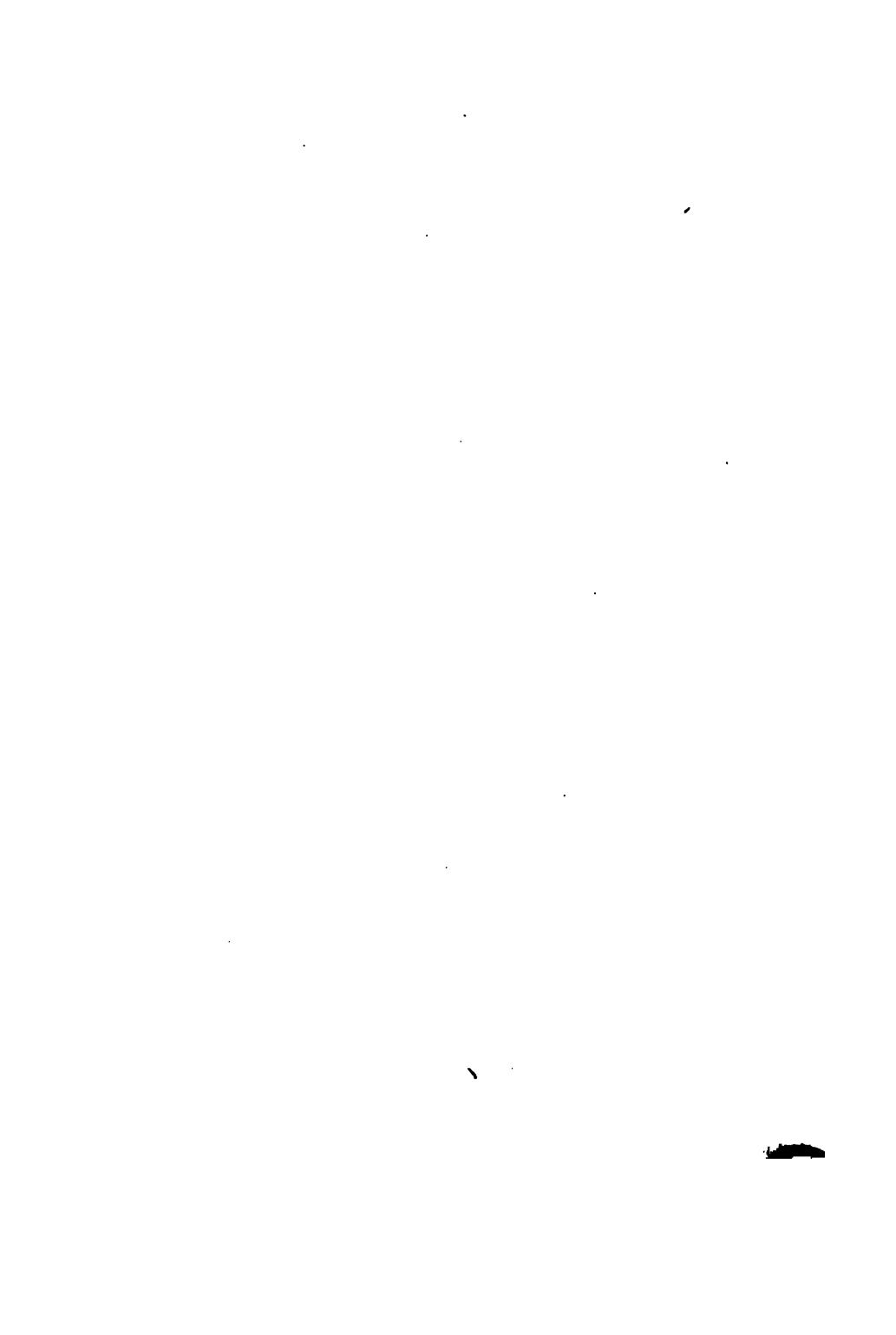
(Signed) VAEVARA.

“Will that do, your Majesty?” she whispered shyly. For answer he looked at her, and his triumph was in his eyes. “Dear!” he breathed softly.

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A moment later the seaman of the dinghy, with the message to his mistress folded safely in his pocket, was pulling for the high-walled harbor. And the knockabout, with all sail set and sheets started, was flying over the waves toward the opposite shore.







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